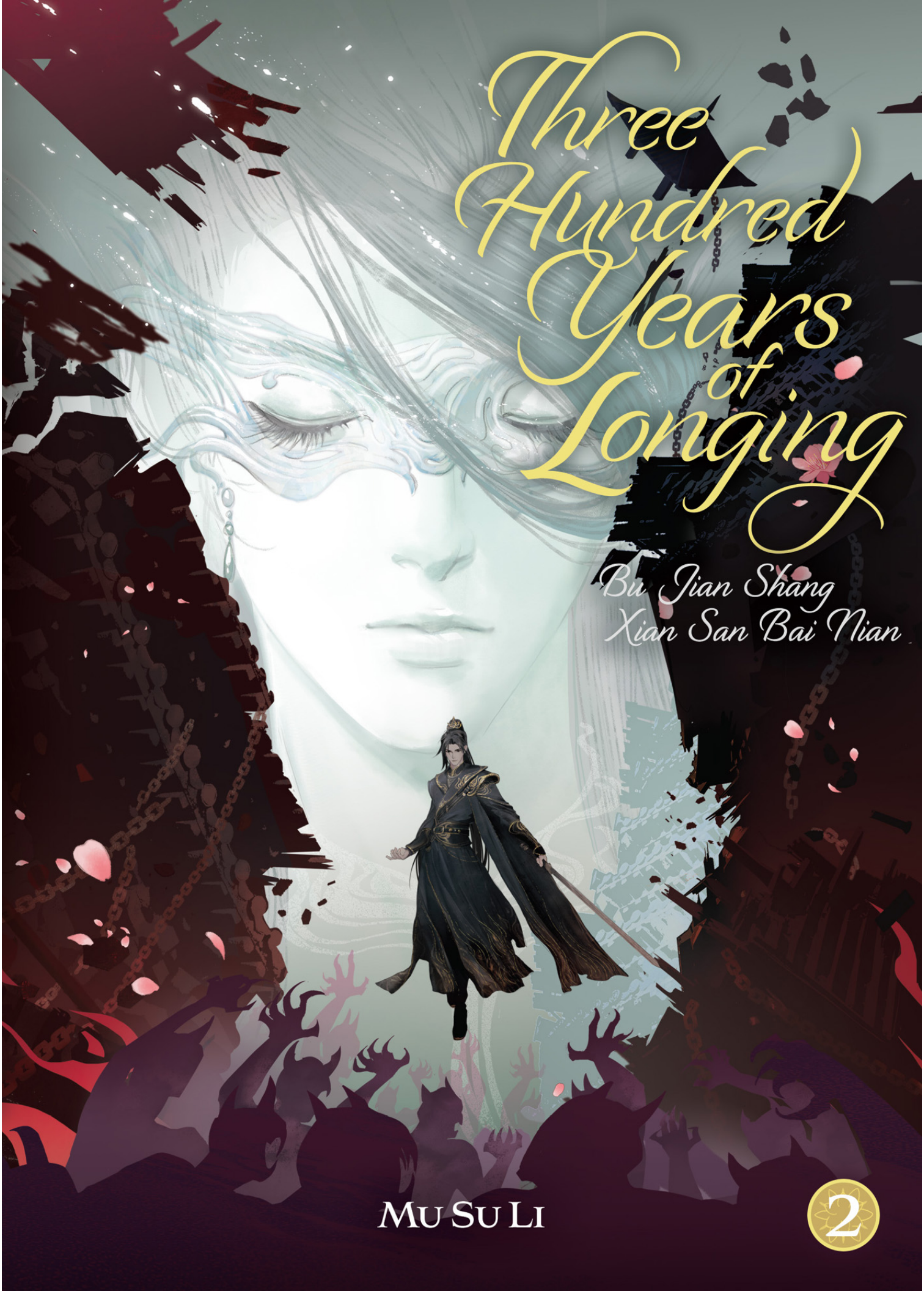
Three Hundred Years of Longing
Bu Jian Shang Xian San Bai Nian
Mu Su Li
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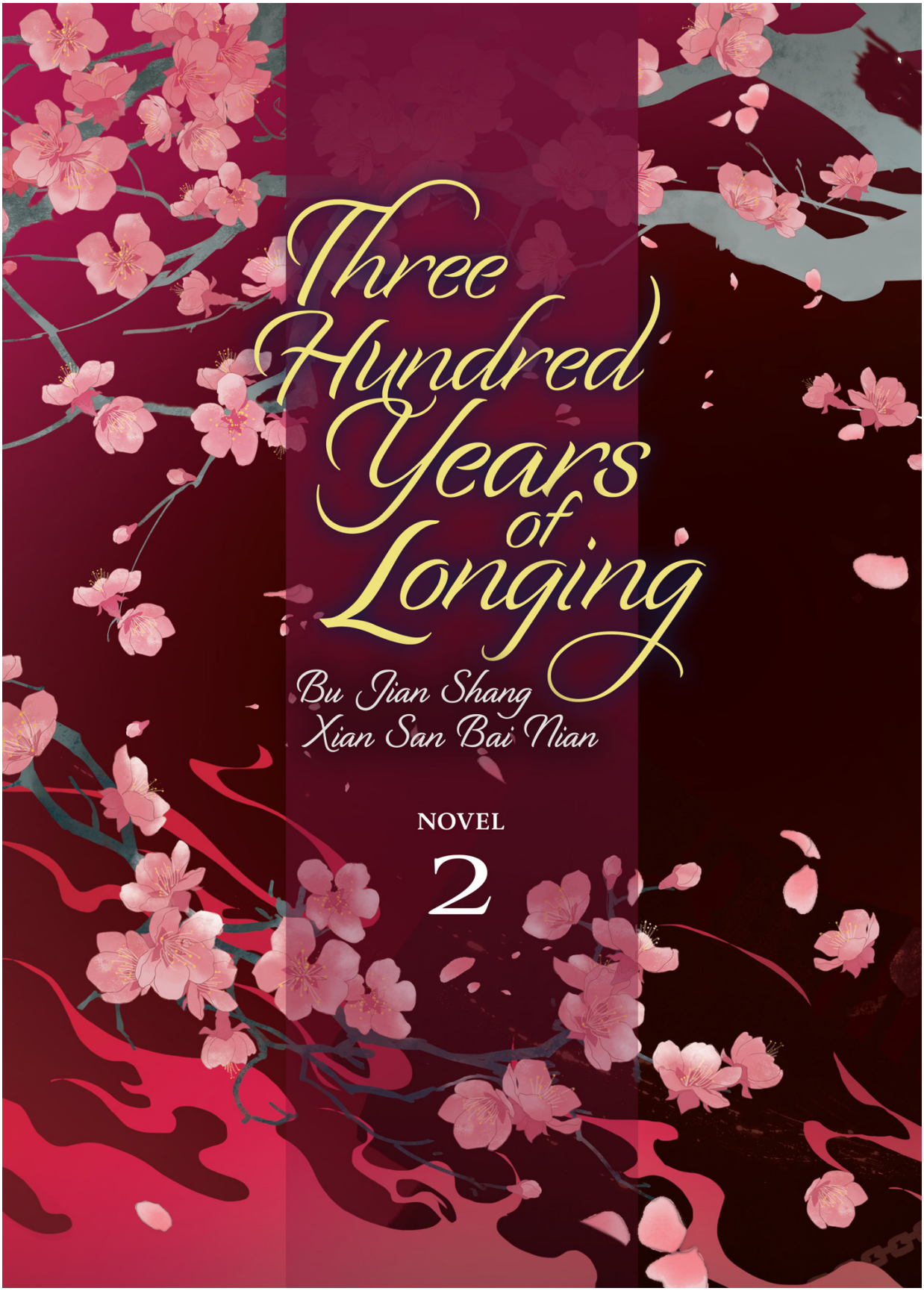
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Seven Seas Entertainment

Three Hundred Years of Longing: Bu Jian Shang Xian San Bai Nian (Novel) Vol. 2

Published originally under the title of《不见上仙三百年》(Three Hundred Years of Longing)
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ISBN: 979-8-89561-126-5
Printed in Canada
First Printing: February 2026
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Chapter 31:
Jadehaem

THE CARRIAGE WAS QUITE FULL, but the mood within left much to be desired.

Xiao Fuxuan, who still preferred to stand, leaned against the wall in his usual spot beside the carriage door. Fang Chu and Yi Wusheng were on one side of the carriage. The moment Fang Chu had boarded, he'd pretended to pass out. He looked now as if he might sleep through the end of the world. On the opposite side of the carriage sat Wu Xingxue. Beside him, Ning Huaishan was curled like a string bean into the corner.

With a sour expression, Ning Huaishan prodded the sword scar on his neck. To his displeasure, the old injury had started to ache again. It felt wet and soft to the touch, like it might split open at any second.

Ning Huaishan decided to take his irritation out on Yi Wusheng. With a sidelong glance, he said bluntly, "I thought you had unfinished business. Is it finished yet or not?"

Yi Wusheng gripped the enchanted paper that let him speak through the cover over his mouth. "I'm ashamed to answer," he replied.

Truth be told, Yi Wusheng had always possessed the eccentricity of the literati. Throughout his life, his curiosity had inspired him to get to the bottom of everything. Without this trait, he would never have developed so many new elixirs. However, due to his status in the Hua Clan, he'd often been forced to keep his inquisitiveness in check; a man in his position had to

focus on the big picture and remain as stable as Mount Tai. Now that his days were numbered, he could finally follow the whims of his heart.

Ning Huaishan had wanted to rile up Yi Wusheng a little. Seeing that the doctor was merely flustered, he lost interest and slumped back into place to continue rubbing at the scar on his neck. His thin frame seemed even more waifish and put-upon as he sulked in the corner.

Yi Wusheng watched him for a while in silence before he spoke.

"Mm, that scar of yours—"

Ning Huaishan instantly turned menacing. "That any of your business?"

In a sense, it was. After all, Yi Wusheng had given it to Ning Huaishan. It was true that clan disciples had every right to annihilate fiends and uphold justice, but as a doctor, he couldn't help his concern.

"Is it hurting you again?" Yi Wusheng pushed.

"No!"

"I have some medicine here that—"

"I won't take it! Another word and you're dead."

Ning Huaishan never held back when he yelled at people, but once the words were out of his mouth, he remembered that the doctor wasn't long for this world. To his surprise, he felt a touch of remorse.

Yi Wusheng froze, smiled, and said nothing more. But he reached inside his medicine bag and took out a single pill anyway.

Ning Huaishan felt even guiltier then. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his archon open his half-closed eyes to give him a stern glance. Abandoning his obstinance at once, Ning Huaishan snatched the pill from Yi

Wusheng's hand and choked it down. He then stretched a leg under the table in the middle of the carriage and nudged Fang Chu's foot.

‹Stop pretending to sleep and help me out,› Ning Huaishan said through etheric whispers.

Fang Chu kept his eyes shut and remained still. After a long while, he silently replied, *‹No.›*

Fang Chu had decided to play dead the moment he boarded the carriage and realized they had a problem. The same five passengers had traveled to the Valley of Laments in this very carriage—three of them fiends of Nightgleam and a fourth their puppet. Yi Wusheng, the sole clan disciple, had been kidnapped and pinned in between a bunch of fiends. He'd seemed doomed.

Most of that had turned out untrue. Yi Wusheng was here of his own free will; the "puppet" was the real Tianxiu Immortal; and their archon was in fact Rex Spiritus of Urbs Caelestia, a celestial whose rank equaled Tianxiu's. Of the five current passengers, three were celestially aligned. It was he and Ning Huaishan who were doomed!

Worse, the old site of the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar was the current entrance to Nightgleam. Fang Chu wondered whether taking a carriage full of celestials back to the fiends' lair counted as colluding with the enemy or staging a coup.

Why do we have to go to Mount Blossomfell Bazaar of all places…? Fang Chu's stomach clenched with anxiety. Suddenly, he heard their archon speak in a languid voice.

"Xiao Fuxuan," Wu Xingxue said. The Tianxiu Immortal turned his gaze on him. "Won't you sit down? There's plenty of room."

Fang Chu's and Ning Huaishan's eyes snapped wide open. Space wasn't the issue! The carriage was roomy enough for three people to sit comfortably on each side. A fiend sitting next to an immortal, however—*that* was an issue. Yi Wusheng and Wu Xingxue were seated at the back of the carriage, while Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu were seated at the front. If Lord Tianxiu sat down, either Fang Chu or Ning Huaishan would be stuck sitting beside him.

Ning Huaishan gave Fang Chu a kick. *‹Hurry up and get over here! Make Tianxiu sit with Yi Wusheng!›*

Fang Chu kicked back. *‹If I go over there, we'll end up squeezing the archon into the corner. Are you nuts?›*

Unfortunately, Fang Chu misdirected his kick, and his foot struck Wu Xingxue.

"I'm not sure if I'm nuts, but you two sure are making a ruckus," Wu Xingxue said, rubbing his hand-warming stove.

Fang Chu froze. This was the first time he'd ever blushed in all his decades as a fiendling. With nothing to say in his defense, he glared at Ning Huaishan, the culprit behind his predicament.

Realizing his thoughts had been exposed, Ning Huaishan didn't dare to remain by Wu Xingxue's side another second and scooted over to sit next to Fang Chu.

Wu Xingxue let a few seconds pass before he uttered in exasperation, "What did you run away for?"

I'm scared of you! Ning Huaishan thought as he settled next to Fang Chu, but he couldn't exactly say that. "I'm making room for Tianxiu," he

instead replied sheepishly.

Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan stared at him in unison.

Ning Huaishan didn't say another word. He knew he'd said something wrong but couldn't fathom what it had been. After he considered it for a while, he put his hand on his neck and made a miserable face, hoping Wu Xingxue would let it slide.

"Archon, my neck hurts," he whined.

Oh? It should be your mouth that hurts, Wu Xingxue thought. He tipped his chin at the offending neck wound and reminded Ning Huaishan, "The side you're holding is already scabbing over. You should move your hand down a bit."

Thanks to Yi Wusheng's extremely effective pill, Ning Huaishan was no longer in pain, and Wu Xingxue knew it. Nevertheless, Ning Huaishan figured he might as well commit to the act and swiped his fingers down a few inches.

"Too late. It's scabbed over there too," Wu Xingxue said softly. He sounded unimpressed.

Ning Huaishan dropped his hand. Wu Xingxue was lazy and typically preferred to ignore his fiendlings rather than shut them down, so Ning Huaishan was quite aggrieved by his tone.

"All I did was give up my seat…" Ning Huaishan mumbled under his breath.

And did he ask you to do that? Wu Xingxue thought, his attention still focused on Ning Huaishan.

Xiao Fuxuan seemed to have a natural aversion to sitting—or perhaps he disliked being close to others. Even if Wu Xingxue asked or Ning Huaishan offered his seat, he'd probably just say, *No need.* That had certainly been the case when they traveled to the Valley of Laments.

Wu Xingxue was about to continue his rebuke of his embarrassed underling when a tall shadow shifted in his peripheral vision. He heard Xiao Fuxuan's long sword brush against his belt pendant as he approached, then his breathing. Finally, the warmth of his body grew vivid as he sat down next to Wu Xingxue.

Wu Xingxue's words dried up in his throat.

Ning Huaishan witnessed an incredible sight: In an instant, Wu Xingxue's threatening presence receded. It reminded Ning Huaishan of an endangered gem-faced civet he'd once seen as a kid. It had arched its spine into an aggressive curve before a few strokes of its chin had rendered it completely docile. Somehow, seeing his inscrutable archon this way was much more disturbing. Ning Huaishan decided Fang Chu had the right idea. If he just closed his eyes and played dead, maybe everything would be fine.

Naturally, Wu Xingxue was not privy to his buffoon underling's nonsensical internal monologue. When he looked up again, he was surprised to find all three people across from him sitting there, eyes closed, like a row of corpses. For a moment, he was speechless—then he swallowed a laugh of exasperation.

"What are you smiling at?" Xiao Fuxuan asked.

"Nothing." Withdrawing his gaze from his "sleeping" companions, he pushed the hand-warming stove deeper into his sleeve and raised his eyes to

Xiao Fuxuan. “They were saying that the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar was a seasonal market that ran a few hundred years ago, but it’s gone now.”

The first time he’d heard about the market was when Yi Wusheng told them that the Dreambell first appeared in the mortal world there. The second time had been during Yunhai’s reckoning. He wasn’t supposed to have any impression of the place, but whenever he heard the bazaar’s name, he recalled a faint, cacophonous chatter. Perhaps that was because of the Dreambell now hanging from his belt. The market must have been a wonderful, lively place before it’d become the entrance to Nightgleam.

This was a change that, according to Ning Huaishan, was Wu Xingxue’s doing.

“What happened to the bazaar?” asked Wu Xingxue.

“A sudden wildfire,” Xiao Fuxuan replied.

“Wildfire?”

“Mm-hmm.” It had happened so long ago that Xiao Fuxuan took a moment to think back before he continued quietly. “The bazaar usually opened on the third day of the Third Month. The rumor was that a wildfire started right after it opened one year. It was so sudden, and the fire spread so quickly, that no one was able to stop it.”

The bazaar had been exceptionally spirited, always illuminated with strings of lantern light. So, when the wildfire began, everyone outside the mountains had assumed the lanterns were being lit like every year before. The mountains had blazed for miles around, the flames so great they even cast their red light over the moon. People in the surrounding areas pointed upward and assured one another that a red moon meant future prosperity. Only once all of Blossomfell Terrace was shrouded in smoke did people

realize something had gone wrong. By the time they rushed over, fire had sealed off the mountain paths. Many cultivation clans tried to bring water to the mountains, calling forth clouds and praying for rain, but even water would not douse the flames. After there was nothing of Blossomfell Terrace left to burn, the wildfire finally subsided.

Yi Wusheng opened his eyes. “I wasn’t alive when it happened, though I’ve heard many rumors since. Many believed it was no ordinary wildfire but a divine punishment upon them.”

At the words *divine punishment*, Wu Xingxue looked at Xiao Fuxuan.

“It didn’t come from Tianxiu,” Yi Wusheng hurried to add. “People said that the Tianxiu Immortal… Well, they said he was under a one-hundred-year proscription in the Extranorthern Reaches.”

Under a proscription? For a hundred years? Wu Xingxue had no idea what a proscription was nor what consequences might ensue from being subjected to one, but before he noticed, he was frowning.

“It was just a few restrictions, nothing of consequence,” Xiao Fuxuan said in a low voice.

Wu Xingxue caught a momentary flash of coldness in Xiao Fuxuan’s expression, as though he did not wish to speak of it further.

Yi Wusheng, who was far more tactful than Ning Huaishan and his ilk, changed the subject.

“At any rate, all of Blossomfell Terrace was scorched to a blackened wasteland, and Mount Blossomfell Bazaar never opened again. They say so much blood seeped into the soil that it turned the crystal-clear mountain streams scarlet and drenched all of Twilight Fen in bloodstained waters. For many years, on the third day of the Third Month, a red moon hung over the mountain peaks as phantom firelight danced over Blossomfell Terrace.”

The first time they’d witnessed this phenomenon, concerned cultivation clans and commoners had rushed to the mountainside. As they’d approached, they’d found there was no wildfire. Later, they theorized the tormented souls lost to the fire were the source of the spectral flames. They began travelling to Blossomfell Terrace once a year on the anniversary of the catastrophe to recite spiritual scriptures and sing hymns to guide the lost souls to their rest; even children who’d only just learned to speak knew some of the lines.

Later still, the bazaar had become the entrance to a den of fiends. Perhaps only evil could counter evil, because Blossomfell Terrace calmed down thereafter. It had been decades since firelight danced over the mountains.

Today, no one thought there was anything particularly special about the location, and Yi Wusheng didn’t understand why they were traveling to the

long-defunct bazaar to restore the Dreambell. The Dreambell was a celestial relic, and the celestials were unlikely to reveal how it was forged or restored without good reason. Most mortals would consider this a subject to avoid, and Yi Wusheng—a lifelong member of a cultivation clan—wasn't about to recklessly violate taboos. That did mean he had to hold back his curiosity so hard his face started to turn a shade of blue, though.

Luckily for him, there was a very venerable being in the carriage who would not hesitate to ask whatever questions he liked and whom Lord Tianxiu always seemed willing to answer.

Thus, Yi Wusheng was relieved when Wu Xingxue asked the one question he wanted to ask most.

"Why must we go to the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar *specifically*?"

"Because there is jadehaem in Blossomfell Terrace," Xiao Fuxuan said.

Wu Xingxue had no idea what "jadehaem" was and stared at Xiao Fuxuan, awaiting an explanation. Instead of offering one of those, Xiao Fuxuan reached out his hand and flicked the Dreambell hanging from Wu Xingxue's belt. Xiao Fuxuan gently took hold of the bell by the edges and lifted it. His eyes filled with the bell's shape.

"The Dreambell was originally made with jadehaem from Blossomfell Terrace," Xiao Fuxuan finally said.

Wu Xingxue said nothing.

The carriage's spirit-warding lamps were unlit, and it was difficult to see inside the gloomy cabin. The only light was the hazy glow through the woolen door curtain that fluttered up from time to time. Xiao Fuxuan could see that Wu Xingxue's eyes were half lidded and that he'd hooked one finger

around the Dreambell's string, but he could not discern Wu Xingxue's expression.

Soon enough, Wu Xingxue silently tugged the white-jade bell back to himself.

Chapter 32:
Tribulation

HOURS EARLIER, the greater archfiend had offered the Dreambell to anyone who would take it, but now that it hung from his belt, he'd changed his mind. He could not remember a shred of the past, yet he felt oddly protective of the Dreambell and reluctant to let anyone else touch it—especially not the Tianxiu Immortal. A strange expression crossed Wu Xingxue's face each time Xiao Fuxuan touched the bell, even though the immortal was the first person he'd proffered the bell to when he didn't want to carry it himself. He wouldn't let Xiao Fuxuan hold on to it for long.

Still playing dead, Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu observed all this with barely open eyes. *He* is *our archon, as moody and inscrutable as ever,* they thought. *Flips through moods faster than we could flip the pages of a book.*

It wasn't like Wu Xingxue *wanted* to tussle with Xiao Fuxuan over a little bell. Neither of them showed anything on their faces, but the whole back-and-forth made it look like they were hiding something, didn't it?

Wu Xingxue decided to close his eyes like his fiendlings. He pretended to nod off against the carriage wall.

Some archfiend you are, he derided himself, *choosing to follow the lead of two fools.*

But a fool's methods were often effective; after faking it for a while, Wu Xingxue began to feel sleepy.

According to Yi Wusheng, these were times of extreme upheaval, and every cultivation clan had set up major and minor thaumaturgical seals and

wards just like those they'd encountered on their way to the Valley of Laments. Layers upon layers of wards covered every city's outskirts, the wilderness, harbors, and other areas. It was impossible to avoid them.

Once upon a time, high-level cultivators could travel by flying sword or ethereal shift from the extreme north to the extreme south in no time at all, but that was no longer the case. It wasn't that cultivation had declined and disabled anyone's ability to do those things. Rather, there was no telling how many wards and seals one might encounter in the brief moment it took to travel, nor how many cultivation clans one might alarm on the way. A flying traveler's hands could grow sore just from catching all the sealed letters sent by disturbed cultivation clans.

To avoid trouble, most clans chose to travel by specially equipped carriages outside of emergencies. Whenever a carriage encountered a seal, it paused for a moment or made a sudden turn, allowing the passengers inside to gauge the number of cities they'd passed along the way.

The journey from the Valley of Laments to Blossomfell Terrace took a full day, and the route passed four cities. In his drowsiness, Wu Xingxue felt a slight jolt through the carriage and assumed they were passing the third city as they approached Blossomfell Terrace.

The chill in the air had intensified considerably, perhaps because they'd set off at dawn and it was now close to dusk, or because they were drawing nearer to Nightgleam. To his surprise, Wu Xingxue actually felt cold. He rubbed his fingertips against the stove hidden in his wide sleeves. The stove was sufficiently hot for a winter night, enough to scald him if he held it too long, yet he was still freezing. He assumed there was a draft somewhere in the carriage at first, then noticed that the cold seemed to radiate from his

bones, as if ice water were flowing through his veins to all of his meridians. The stove in his hands wasn't enough to counter that otherworldly chill, so he tried to circulate his vital force through his body's meridians, which only made him feel colder.

Amnesia is so annoying, Wu Xingxue thought. *Sure, I can attack and kill without batting an eyelid, but I'm utter deadweight at times like these.*

He opened one eye a smidgen to see if there were any blankets available and saw Xiao Fuxuan gazing in his direction, either watching him or letting his mind wander. Wu Xingxue froze for a moment, then quietly closed his eyes again. He didn't want to grab a blanket and draw attention to himself, so he resigned himself to enduring the cold.

As an archfiend, it's not like I'm going to freeze to death!

Swaddled in that unnatural chill, Wu Xingxue drifted into a half sleep. He drowsily clutched the Dreambell in his closed fist where no one could touch it.

Perhaps because he was holding the white-jade bell, his senses faded, and he slipped into a dream.

He was cold in the dream too; the same eerie chill gripped his bones and streamed through his body. Wearing only a thin robe, he stood in a huge courtyard and washed his empty hands beneath a segment of green bamboo. Ice coated the lichen on the stacked stones, and though the water was obviously frigid, he did not feel it as it coursed over his pale fingers.

"Archon," someone called.

Wu Xingxue flexed his fingers a couple of times before he languorously straightened and turned toward the voice.

Fang Chu stood beneath a towering tree at the edge of a deep pool surrounded with piles of snow. The pool bubbled with a viscous liquid that looked almost black until it splashed spots of crimson onto the snow. An arm reached from the pool and clawed at the air, but after a single kick from Fang Chu, it sank below the surface. The pool stilled. Fang Chu scrubbed the blood from the sole of his shoe on a clump of sedge grass.

"Archon, we've taken care of these two blabbermouths, but I've got no idea how much their gossip has already spread," he reported.

Wu Xingxue grabbed a white towel from a silver rack by the bamboo water pump and wiped his hands. "I don't remember their faces. Where did those little mice come from?"

Fang Chu paused for a moment before repeating, "Little mice?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. The archon liked to use terms that anyone who didn't know better might assume were pet names. The two "little mice" were just idiots who had made a misguided attempt to infiltrate Fly-On-By for their master. Unfortunately for them, they'd found the archon in a bad mood and ended up in the blood pool, not even a bone left behind. Then again, things might have gone worse for them had the archon been in a *good* mood.

Ning Huaishan had always been afraid of the blood pool, but it didn't bother Fang Chu—after all, he was still alive because of it. Fang Chu noticed a small golden hook floating in the blood and used a finger to fish it out.

After a close inspection, he said, "Archon, look. It's a soul hook."

As a den of fiends, Nightgleam had no sentimentality or humanity. Most greater archfiends populated their estates with an entourage of fiendling errand runners and servants. They stayed obedient if the archfiends were

strong enough to keep them in line—but if the archfiends grew too injured or weak to keep the fiendlings in check, they would turn into wolves and bite the hands that fed them.

For peace of mind, some archfiends placed soul hooks through their fiendlings' Gates of Life, the meridian points on the spine between the kidneys. The archfiends then used the hooks like the leashes mortals fastened to their dogs.

Soul hooks were hidden beneath the skin and revealed only after their wearers died. Someone in a cultivation clan who dared to use a soul hook would never leave an identifying mark and risk exposure, whereas the imperious archfiends proudly gave their soul hooks unique markings to increase their infamy. The greater an archfiend's notoriety, the less likely the underlings were to misbehave. Fang Chu recognized the marking on this soul hook immediately.

"Archon, the hook belongs to Lord Sang."

"Lord Sang? Which Lord Sang?"

Fang Chu gaped at him.

"Oh, you mean Sang Yu?"

"There's only one Lord Sang in all of Nightgleam," Fang Chu muttered in disbelief. *Who else could I possibly mean?!*

Several prominent Nightgleam archfiends were infamous enough that speaking their names caused terror, and Sang Yu was one of them. It was hard to believe that Wu Xingxue would forget Lord Sang, whose notoriety was second only to his own. Then again, the archon was so powerful that it was plausible that nobody merited his attention. In the past, Fang Chu might have

wondered if Wu Xingxue was feigning ignorance to mock Lord Sang, but having spent years at Wu Xingxue's side, he believed the archon's dismissiveness was genuine. Those who truly concerned Wu Xingxue could be counted on one hand.

"Where's Ning Huaishan?" Wu Xingxue asked, setting down the towel.

"Out running errands. He's trying to finish everything you asked of him over the next two days. He was grumbling about having chills yesterday, so I reckon his tribulation's about to hit. A few more days and he won't be able to go anywhere."

Wu Xingxue looked unbothered at the prospect.

Fang Chu glanced cautiously at Wu Xingxue a few times. "Archon, your own tribulation…"

Wu Xingxue turned toward him, and Fang Chu shut up. He did not dare to continue.

"Since the soul hook is Sang Yu's, you should come with me," said Wu Xingxue.

Fang Chu tried to hand over the soul hook. "Why should you have to go to his place, Archon? He should be the one scrambling to come over here and apologize."

"There's no need for that," Wu Xingxue said. He ignored the soul hook and walked empty-handed through the long corridor toward the main doors. "I'd prefer he stay away. Can't stand the way he smells."

Trying to hand Wu Xingxue the soul hook was a perfunctory gesture, and when he did not take it, Fang Chu slipped it into his own bag with practiced ease.

“Necromancers do have an odor about them, but Lord Sang is an expert, so he barely stinks anymore,” said Fang Chu, before he recalled that his archon was far fussier than the average archfiend.

Inside the dream, it was midwinter. Nightgleam was shrouded in fog, and white clouds formed with their every breath as they rode to Lord Sang’s vast estate. On arrival, Wu Xingxue stepped down from his black carriage and through the gates. The fiends of Nightgleam were prone to many eccentricities, and the city was home to numerous bizarre estates. This was especially true of necromancers, whose residences were often built like underground palaces for the dead. From the outside, Sang Yu’s estate appeared perfectly normal, no different than the aristocratic estates of the Imperial Capital, but it was a different story once they stepped through the front door.

In an ordinary household, the reception hall had guest chairs on either side of the room. Not here. Where chairs should have been, a row of black coffins lined the walls instead. The coffin lids were tightly sealed with studs and covered in yellow paper talismans. Disembodied laughter drifted in and out of the room, a spooky sound likely to scare a commoner out of his wits. Wu Xingxue ignored it, leading Fang Chu through the hall to the rest of the estate.

Sang Yu’s underlings fell into step behind them, trying frantically to stop them, though they maintained a safe distance. “Archon! Archon! Hey, Archon!” they called.

“I’m listening,” replied Wu Xingxue as he walked. His gait was quite measured, yet he crossed corridors with a single step. His uncanny pace made the underlings’ pursuit haphazard.

“Our Lord Sang, um, he’s not really fit to receive guests right now,” one underling said. The others chimed in with similar words. Sang Yu had always been arrogant, and his underlings followed suit; normally, they’d execute presumptuous trespassers without a word of warning. However, since they didn’t dare lift a hand against Wu Xingxue, all they could do was run off at the mouth.

“Oh, I see,” Wu Xingxue acknowledged. “What does that have to do with me? I didn’t ask. It’s none of my business, anyway.”

The underlings fell silent, and Wu Xingxue continued through the place as if it were unguarded. After a few turns, he halted in front of a tall building exuding a funereal nether energy so intense it felt as if tens of thousands of people were interred there. Sang Yu was inside, that much was clear. Fang Chu noticed the strong smell. Wu Xingxue’s brows furrowed, and he pressed his hand over his nose with a flourish.

The underlings’ jaws dropped.

They could not stop him, so they turned toward the building and shouted as one, “My lord, the archon is here!”

They milled about like wolfdogs with yellowing eyes and emaciated bodies who could smell nearby prey they were too weak to hunt. They seemed eager to approach the door yet afraid to get too close.

There was no reply from inside the building beyond the murmur of barely audible voices, their sound distorted as if they rose from below deep water. The swirling nether energy thickened.

“My lord—” the underlings began to shout again.

Wu Xingxue, his empty hands hanging calmly at his sides, twitched his fingers. An invisible force sundered the restrictive wards on the sealed doors, which flung open with a loud bang. Thick, musty nether aura seeped from the interior in a billowing gray mist. Wu Xingxue turned his face aside to avoid the malodor, then looked back inside. There, in a room reeking of half-dried blood, piles of shadows entwined atop a bed with wide-open curtains.

Now that the wards were broken, the sounds that had been dampened within spilled out unimpeded, crashing high and low against the walls and windows. All fiends ever wanted was pleasure without sentiment, and they lacked an ordinary person's sense of shame or morality. Sang Yu glanced toward the door just once before he narrowed his eyes and turned away.

After a moment, he rolled over and sat up with deliberate ease. With one leg propped up among the mess of entangled bodies, he directed a hoarse voice at the door.

"Archon, what are you doing here?" asked Sang Yu. "I just happen to be on my tribulation. It's far too cold, so I invited some guests to help keep me warm. Apologies for not greeting you at the door."

There was no expression on Wu Xingxue's face, but Fang Chu averted his eyes.

Seeing him look away, Sang Yu laughed. "What, doesn't everyone get through tribulations this way? Or have you found some other way?"

Embraced by pulsing bodies and covered in sweat, Sang Yu certainly did not seem cold—but when his sweat dried, he began to shiver. He returned his focus to his bed, grabbed a hand from the pile, and bit it. Even as many pairs of arms continued to embrace him, he drank the flowing blood. At first, the hand's owner didn't react; they only started to struggle after a long while.

After the hand went still, Sang Yu tossed it aside, leaned back against the pile of bodies, and looked toward the greater archfiend at his door. Blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. He wrinkled his nose and pretended to sniff around.

"Oh, that's right," Sang Yu said. "My underlings reported that you had your own tribulation just a few days ago, Archon. Hah, life is great for those of us who cultivate this path. We can really do as we please. The only downside is how hard it is to endure our tribulations. The higher our level of cultivation, the harder they are. That actually makes me feel better, Archon!" Sang Yu laughed. "Your tribulation must feel *much* worse than mine, yet I've never seen you grab anyone to ease you through it. I'm honestly curious, how do you manage? I sent some people to keep an eye on you, but it looks like they won't be coming back."

Sang Yu clearly knew why Wu Xingxue was there and decided not to beat around the bush any longer. After he sighed with faux sincerity, he laid it all out in the open: "Those poor things. Then again, they told me something rather interesting yesterday. During your recent tribulation, they saw someone at Fly-On-By that made them think they must've gone mad and started hallucinating. Since those two are already dead, Archon, let me ask you this question instead."

He looked directly at Wu Xingxue. "What was the Tianxiu Immortal doing with you during something like your tribulation?"

Chapter 33:
Silenced

ONCE SANG YU ASKED this question, a hush descended over the bed, the building, and even the rest of the Sang Estate. Sang Yu's underlings turned their heads in unison, and dozens of eyes fixed unblinkingly on Wu Xingxue. At a moment like this, neither the archon's status nor his infamy was enough to suppress their insatiable desire to pry.

The only one who didn't dare show a trace of curiosity was Fang Chu.

Sang Yu shifted his posture and called out again. "Hey, Archon?" On his own turf, he was even more brazen than he was outside his estate. "Looks like you don't—"

"What else did they say?" Wu Xingxue interrupted.

Sang Yu blinked at him, not understanding the question.

"What else did your two little mice tell you." Wu Xingxue's voice was light and airy, but the inquisitive lift that should have been on the final syllable was replaced with a descending imperative.

Fang Chu finally couldn't resist glancing at his archon. His lips worked several times as though he wanted to speak, but as he grew increasingly anxious, he could think of nothing to say.

Sang Yu tensed for a second before he relaxed. It was either an act or reckless overconfidence from all the vital blood energy he'd imbibed during his tribulation. He radiated satisfaction as he basked in the bliss of afterglow.

“They told me quite a lot actually,” he said with a smile. “You seem very concerned… Ah, forgive me, I should say you seem very *touchy* about this subject. Why is that? I’ve been wondering since I first heard the reports from those poor things.

“Tribulations are unavoidable, since there are *so* many vengeful spirits in the world who like to give us a hard time now and then. Ordinary people’s energy is used up quickly, but it’s easy to catch more of them. Clan disciples are harder to secure but far better at subduing vengeful spirits. And immortals from Urbs Caelestia? Logically, they’d be the best of the best, but they’re impossible to capture, and we can’t use them, anyway—their celestial energy can’t coexist with our infernal energy. Thinking back…”

Sang Yu paused as though he’d forgotten what he was about to say, but a sneer quickly crossed his face, and he continued. “At any rate, I bear you no ill will. I just wondered whether you’d found some way to solve this problem.” Holding his chin in one hand, he focused his narrowed gaze squarely on Wu Xingxue. “The Tianxiu Immortal is the god of penance, you know? We in Nightgleam avoid him like the plague. Even the very mention of his name makes us want to flee in the other direction. How did you manage to use *him*?”

Sang Yu’s eyes swept over Wu Xingxue’s light, plain garments and saw no signs that he was suffering from the otherworldly chill that accompanied a tribulation. “It looks to me like you’re getting through your tribulation rather well, Archon. As a fellow citizen of Nightgleam, won’t you tell me how you do it? I’m tired of grabbing cultivators. I’d much rather try my luck nabbing a few minor celestials.”

The pain and cold a fiend had to endure during their tribulations worsened over time. If the vital force of a couple of commoners was enough for the first, the next would require three to five, and the need only grew with each tribulation. Eventually, a time would come when no amount of ordinary people's energy could subdue the vengeful spirits. This forced a fiend to rely on cultivators.

What happened when even the blood of cultivators was insufficient to hold back the onslaught? Sang Yu was already near the pinnacle of necromancy but could not progress further in part because of his tribulations. His only frame of reference in Nightgleam for someone stronger was the archon, so it was unsurprising that he'd sent spies.

Wu Xingxue never interrupted Sang Yu. The more he spoke, the more he would reveal how much he knew. Only when Sang Yu had said all he had to say did Wu Xingxue open his mouth.

"There's just one thing I don't understand."

"What is it?"

"What made you think I'd tell you anything?"

Sang Yu laughed. "Of course I knew it wouldn't be that easy. Otherwise, how could you continue to leave the rest of us in the dust? Considering how sensitive you are on the subject, I'm sure it's a secret you won't share. But you know better than anyone what people in Nightgleam are like. We don't entertain personal sentiments. Just take a look at these dogs I'm keeping, for instance." He gestured at his underlings beyond the door. "Every single one is waiting for its chance to get its teeth in me. It's hard to get a peaceful night's sleep with so many eager pups circling. Those who would bite *me* are small fry, but those who would bite *you*? Well, Archon,

that's a different story. What might happen if your enemies find out you're guarding a secret technique?"

Unsurprised, Wu Xingxue nodded. "Looks like your two little mice really did have loose lips. Well then, tell me this. How many people do you think you'd have to tell for it to have any effect on me?"

For an instant, Sang Yu's cheekbone pulsed as his jaw tensed. "Let me see…"

It wasn't that Sang Yu was entirely without scruples. The common perception was true: The fiends of Nightgleam did not care for sentiment, yet they seldom provoked one another. Once a fiend turned his fellow fiends into starving wolves, it became very difficult to get a good night's sleep. Sang Yu had a healthy fear of Wu Xingxue, but a technique to get through one's tribulations using a celestial would be highly valuable. If it spread that Wu Xingxue refused to share his method, he risked provoking public outrage and drawing the wolves right to his doorstep.

"Cui Yin? Chang Gu? Master Hongguang?" One by one, Sang Yu recited the names of formidable Nightgleam fiends with whom few would trifle. He only paused when he noticed how carefully Wu Xingxue was listening to him. Of everything Sang Yu had said so far, Wu Xingxue had fixated on these names.

"That's seven," noted Wu Xingxue. "Any more?"

Sang Yu's expression darkened. "What do you mean, Archon?"

"That was only seven names. Are there any more? If you want me to reveal my secret technique, you'll need more than seven names to back up your demand."

Sang Yu's expression grew stormier with each of Wu Xingxue's words. He grabbed a long robe draped over the edge of the bed, his gaze fixed on Wu Xingxue the whole time. He didn't dare look away.

Suddenly, Wu Xingxue stepped past the threshold, while Fang Chu followed behind. Sang Yu's fingers twitched as they gripped the robe, and he gave up three more names in a single breath.

"That's ten," Wu Xingxue said. "Any more?"

Sang Yu chuckled, his fingers already curling in. Freshly consumed blood and vitality flowed through his veins, and his meridian lines surfaced on his neck and face. "It's the Tianxiu Immortal, you know?" he said. "Such an extraordinary thing, can you guess—"

Before he could finish his question, the pale white silhouette before him shifted like a ghost. As Sang Yu blinked, a chill swept past him. When his eyes opened again, Wu Xingxue was in the same spot. The only difference was the slight fluttering of his sleeves and the sword in his hand.

"Why, *you*!" Sang Yu cried out.

Wu Xingxue tipped his head to one side. "Why I what?"

The next instant, all of Sang Yu's underlings surrounding the building burst into a chorus of shrill screams—that soon transformed mid-shriek into airy gasps. The heavy stench of blood filled the air, accompanied by a series of thuds as the underlings' severed heads struck the floor. Sang Yu's little mice died so quickly that their bodies remained upright and at attention while blood gushed from the raw stumps of their necks. Wu Xingxue had struck so quickly that his sword remained spotless until it was splattered by the

spurting blood. He gave the sword a light flick, and the blood disappeared as white hoarfrost spread from the hilt.

According to legend, Wu Xingxue preferred to stay empty-handed and never carried a sword. Sang Yu had heard this, but because they were both archfiends who never crossed blades, he'd never witnessed it until this very moment. He cast a quick glance at Fang Chu and noticed the empty scabbard hanging from his belt.

Bam!

The doors slammed behind Wu Xingxue, closing so tightly that Sang Yu could not discern a gap. Next, every lamp in the room was extinguished. The room plunged into darkness.

What line did I even cross? It was just one secret! How did it come to this?! But Sang Yu had no chance to dwell on these questions. He had to accept that he'd miscalculated, and the time to negotiate with the archon had ended.

"All I wanted was the technique!" he roared.

He set ten golden talismans ablaze. In a split second, the residents of hundreds of black coffins sprang to life. Paper talismans fluttered as the coffin lids exploded outward. Amid a spray of coffin studs, the reanimated corpses burst free and ran howling for the main house.

Sang Yu had thought himself a mere step below the archon of Nightgleam—that the difference between him and Wu Xingxue was a mere fraction of an inch. As long as he chose the right time to strike, he'd assumed their divide was bridgeable, not some yawning abyss. His behavior up to this moment had been because he'd assumed, based on his two dead underlings' reports, that Wu Xingxue was unwell. This day was as good a time as any.

From a fiend's perspective, it was obvious that Wu Xingxue's sickly appearance was the result of clashing celestial and infernal energies. Why would the archon of Nightgleam take such a huge risk? The answer was: He *wouldn't*. If the Tianxiu Immortal was visiting Fly-On-By, then Wu Xingxue must know some way to meld celestial and infernal energies. A complete union of the two would take time, and as long as the union was incomplete, the archon would not be at full strength, leveling any difference between his and Sang Yu's abilities. Sang Yu had counted on it.

As Wu Xingxue pinned Sang Yu by the neck against the ice-cold wall, in a house that roiled with the suffocating stench of imploding reanimated corpses, he had to accept that it had all been in vain.

"How could this be…" Sang Yu croaked with difficulty as he stared, wide-eyed, at Wu Xingxue. "Why is there no hint of celestial energy on you?"

Once Wu Xingxue had finished his tribulation, some hint of the Tianxiu Immortal's celestial energy should have clung to him, no matter how well the energies had melded. The musty nether aura in the room was so thick that, until they were standing right next to one another, Sang Yu had failed to notice that Wu Xingxue carried no trace of Tianxiu's energy.

"You…" Sang Yu gasped as blood vessels began to burst in his eyeballs.

Wu Xingxue ignored his question. "Aside from those ten, who else is there?" he asked softly.

Through the blood foaming over his teeth, Sang Yu said, "One will tell ten…and ten will tell a hundred. How are you going to stop it, Archon? When

word gets out of Nightgleam and crosses into the mortal world…when it reaches Urbs Caelestia…how will you stop it then?"

Wu Xingxue turned his head aside and made a clawing motion in the air. Every coffin stud tore itself from the flesh of the reanimated corpses and fell neatly into his hand. Each seven-inch stud was attached to a talisman and festooned with strips of bloody flesh.

"They can't tell anyone if they're dead," he said, looking levelly at Sang Yu.

Sang Yu's pupils contracted. As an archfiend, this was the closest he'd ever come to feeling a chill run through his body. It wasn't a murderous aura of fury; it was more akin to the frost of tribulation. Fear rattled his bones and permeated every inch of his flesh.

"What? Are you going to…kill them all…one by one?"

"Can't I?" Wu Xingxue asked, his inflection suggesting this was a serious question, though his face showed no concern regarding the answer.

Sang Yu understood that he'd crossed a line. Funny thing was, before this happened, he'd never imagined Wu Xingxue had any lines to be crossed. Even more baffling was that he could not fathom which of his words had been worthy of crossing Wu Xingxue's mysterious red line.

Wu Xingxue stared at Sang Yu, and for a brief moment he looked weary. He shook it off with a laugh. "You just wait and see."

"What?!"

Fang Chu shared Sang Yu's confusion. He peered at Wu Xingxue as he tried to comprehend his words.

They both understood soon enough. Wu Xingxue did not kill Sang Yu. Instead, the archon pinned Sang Yu to the wall with the same coffin studs he had carved with incantations. Then, he moved through Nightgleam as the night deepened, searching out the names given to him by Sang Yu.

One by one, he killed them.

"Who else is there?" he asked before slaughtering them. *Who else knows my secret?*

A perpetual cold fog shrouded the Nightgleam in Wu Xingxue's dreams, and he could neither intuit nor feel precisely what his dream-self felt. As he departed his last victim's estate, a pale watery light shone through the mist. Looking up at it, he narrowed his eyes and handed the sword to Fang Chu.

"What time is it?"

Fang Chu had followed him throughout the night, and his pupils contracted in subconscious fear when Wu Xingxue held out the sword.

"It's almost dawn," Fang Chu replied hoarsely. He took the sword and returned it to its scabbard. An embroidered bag tied to his belt beside it jangled with all the personal items they'd lifted from the slaughtered fiends.

With Fang Chu still in tow, Wu Xingxue returned to Sang Yu's estate, where they'd begun the night. He stood before the pinned Sang Yu and nodded to Fang Chu, who untied the bag from his belt and poured out its contents. Each item was distinctive and easily recognizable. Sang Yu's eyes slowly scanned each object while his pinned arms and legs trembled.

People said that Wu Xingxue appeared the least fiendish of all the fiends in Nightgleam. In that moment, Sang Yu learned that Wu Xingxue in

his true, unfettered state was perhaps the only archfiend in Nightgleam worthy of the title.

It was the last thing he ever learned. As dozens of coffin studs fell to the floor in a cacophony of clattering metal, Sang Yu's corpse collapsed with a heavy thud. The last of his thick blood spattered the floor where he landed.

Wu Xingxue gazed down at him for a moment, then turned to Fang Chu. "Let's head back."

When they arrived at Fly-On-By, they ran into Ning Huaishan just returning from his errands. His tribulation was imminent, and though the chill was still bearable, he rubbed his hands together and stamped his feet to warm himself.

"Are you and Archon only just getting back now?" he asked Fang Chu. "Where were you?"

Fang Chu glanced at Wu Xingxue, then shook his head many times. "Nothing. Don't ask any more questions."

"Oh, okay." Ning Huaishan acquiesced and continued to stomp his cold feet as he followed Wu Xingxue inside. "Archon, I'll need to go into isolated cultivation for a few days again." He sniffled.

Without a glance at Ning Huaishan, Wu Xingxue said, "Yes, I know. Fang Chu already told me." He doffed his gossamer outer robe and gave it a cursory once-over. The blood clinging to the hem was already dry, and though a simple spell could remove the stain, Wu Xingxue handed it to Fang Chu.

"Burn it," he said.

Fang Chu and Ning Huaishan were not at all surprised. Their archon was famously fastidious, especially when it came to blood. Sometimes they suspected that Wu Xingxue couldn't tolerate the sight of it, though they dismissed the idea as foolish. How could someone who was squeamish kill with such efficiency and speed?

Fang Chu carried the robe to the blood pool and rubbed two fingers together to conjure a flame. After burning the bloodied robe, he cleaned the blood off the scabbard as well—just in case—then entered a nearby building to pick out a clean outer garment. He chose a gossamer, light-gray robe similar to the one he'd just burned, but when he stepped into Wu Xingxue's room, he turned and hurried back out again.

"What is it?" Wu Xingxue called after him.

"I grabbed the wrong robe," Fang Chu replied. "Please wait a moment, Archon."

As Fang Chu reentered the outbuilding, Ning Huaishan followed him in.

Ning Huaishan rubbed his arms for warmth. "Why's it taking you so long just to get a robe?"

Fang Chu looked at him askance. "You don't know shit."

"What do you mean I don't know? I've fetched clothes for the archon before!"

Fang Chu searched among the clothing and picked out a fox-fur overcoat.

"Hey, hey, are you nuts?" Ning Huaishan demanded. "The robe the archon had you burn was as thin as cicada wings, and you're pulling out fox

fur over here? Are you trying to smother him? If you want to dig your own grave, go right ahead, but I'm outta here. Give me a minute to flee before you take that to him."

"You, you are completely—" he began, but quickly faltered. When he couldn't think of what to say, he settled for grabbing Ning Huaishan by the scruff of the neck like a kitten and pulling him back. "Nope. Don't even think about running away. If we die, we die together."

Fang Chu hesitated, but he eventually narrated the events of the past night to Ning Huaishan anyway. The two of them had always been terrified of Wu Xingxue, and neither was mad enough to ask him to explain his "secret technique." Presumably, they would never end up crossing the same line that Sang Yu had.

After hearing the whole story, Ning Huaishan shivered. "Did Sang Yu really say that the archon bore no trace of Tianxiu's celestial energy?"

Fang Chu nodded. "Yeah. If he already overcame his tribulation, there should still be some residual energy on him."

Ning Huaishan suddenly understood why Fang Chu had swapped out the thin robe for the fox fur. "So, right now, the archon is freezing." *The unnatural chill must be unbearable*, he thought, then his confusion returned. "Wait, if the archon is really that cold, why was he wearing a thin robe in the first place? Just to convince Sang Yu and the others that he's fine?"

Fang Chu shook his head. "Probably not. If he was wearing it just to trick Sang Yu, he would've only put it on when he left the house, but he was wearing it before that."

"Why would he need to put on a brave face in his own house? Why suffer the cold in only a thin garment if no one was around to see it?"

Fang Chu shrugged, then had a flash of insight. He elbowed Ning Huaishan. “Could it be the Tianxiu Immortal?”

Fang Chu’s words shocked Ning Huaishan so badly he needed a moment to recover.

“I *guess* that’s possible,” Ning Huaishan said. “If the Tianxiu Immortal really came here, and things didn’t go the way Sang Yu assumed, then the archon couldn’t afford to look weak. Otherwise…” He paused, now even more confused. “That can’t be right. If the Tianxiu Immortal came to Fly-On-By, and if things weren’t how Sang Yu said, wouldn’t there have been some kind of fight? Surely one of them would have been wounded and this place would be trashed. No way this place would still look like this.”

Fang Chu also understood less and less the longer he thought about it. Only after they stopped whispering and began to think in earnest did they sense that something wasn’t quite right—there was a third presence in the room. They started in alarm and turned to find Wu Xingxue leaning against the door, his dark eyes fixed on them.

There was no way to know how long he’d been listening.

Wu Xingxue had killed a lot of people that night and expended a significant amount of his vital force. Once he returned home, he’d relaxed—and inadvertently exposed something he took great pains to hide. Fang Chu and Ning Huaishan detected it then: the foreign scent that clung to their archon. They froze as they recognized it was Tianxiu’s celestial aura.

At the same time, it occurred to Fang Chu that the line Sang Yu and the others had crossed wasn’t blackmailing Wu Xingxue. No, their true crime had been spreading the word that the Tianxiu Immortal had visited Fly-On-By.

Just as this thought flashed through Fang Chu's mind, Wu Xingxue disappeared from his position by the door and appeared in front of them.

"I swear I won't say anything, Archon!" Fang Chu blurted out in alarm.

Wu Xingxue's raised hand paused in the air.

Fang Chu grabbed Ning Huaishan. "We swear we won't say a single word about your tribulation!"

But his words were in vain. As Wu Xingxue's hand came down and everything went dark, they faintly heard the chime of a bell.

Wu Xingxue woke to the damp patter of rain against the carriage. A light tremor shook through the cabin as they passed another restrictive ward. The last thing he'd seen in the dream was the Dreambell hanging from his curled finger, freezing Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu in place. Fang Chu's fearful cry still lingered in his ears: *We swear we won't say a single word about your tribulation!*

In its echo, he opened his eyes and saw Xiao Fuxuan's profile dimly illuminated in the lamplight. Unlike a spirit-warding lamp, the lantern's light was gentle on the eyes as it swayed inside the cabin. Its warm yellow glow touched Xiao Fuxuan's brow, then the high, straight bridge of his nose, and finally the bow of his lips. Still shaking off his drowsiness, Wu Xingxue stared lethargically and pressed his lips together. As if sensing something, Xiao Fuxuan looked up at him. Wu Xingxue stilled as he remembered how frequently the words *Tianxiu Immortal* had appeared in his dream.

Once he realized what he was doing, he frantically withdrew his gaze from Xiao Fuxuan's mouth.

"Archon, are you awake?"

“Archon?”

Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu’s voices rang out, almost blending into the echo from his dream.

Wu Xingxue paused to situate himself. They were in a carriage on their way to Blossomfell Terrace. He could see out of the corner of his eye that Xiao Fuxuan was still gazing at him, so he straightened up in his seat and blurted something out to the three passengers across from him.

“We haven’t arrived yet?”

To Wu Xingxue’s surprise, before Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu could reply, Xiao Fuxuan answered. “We’ve arrived.”

Wu Xingxue stared at him blankly. “We’ve arrived?”

He’d noticed that the carriage had stopped moving after that last shudder roused him from his half sleep. The trip must truly have ended. Bewildered, Wu Xingxue leaned forward, his gaze still fixed on the other side of the carriage.

“If we’ve arrived, why haven’t any of you moved?”

Again, Xiao Fuxuan responded first, his voice quiet. “Those two didn’t dare wake you.”

I’m not talking to you, so why do you keep answering? Wu Xingxue thought in exasperation. *You’ve barely spoken for days, but now you’re stringing together one sentence after another.*

Since Xiao Fuxuan had spoken twice in a row, Wu Xingxue could hardly continue staring at the others. But instead of looking at Xiao Fuxuan, he glanced down at himself. When he’d fallen asleep, he’d been wearing a single-layered robe and holding a hand-warming stove. Now, he was covered

in a thick woolen blanket. As he sat up, the thick blanket slipped a little, admitting a blast of cold. Wu Xingxue subconsciously grabbed the blanket and pulled it up again.

"This blanket…" Wu Xingxue began.

For once, Ning Huaishan was hesitant to speak, and Fang Chu knew better, so it was Yi Wusheng who piped up. "I noticed earlier…your knuckles were turning blue. You must have been a bit cold."

I'm far more than just a bit, Wu Xingxue thought. He was about to nod and thank Yi Wusheng when the doctor continued: "So the Lord Immortal covered you."

Wu Xingxue fell silent and turned his eyes on Xiao Fuxuan at last.

As luck would have it, that was when Ning Huaishan chose to stammer, "A-Archon, you may not know about this. Our constitution is special, s-so every once in a while—"

He was going to say something like *Vengeful spirits appear to devour our bodies*, but as his mouth formed the syllables, he looked at Xiao Fuxuan and changed course. "Uh, some *situations* arise…"

"And during such times, we feel an unbearable chill," Fang Chu added from beside him. "The more powerful you are, the harder it is to endure, and, um…"

Though they couldn't say it in the presence of a celestial, they were also worried that Wu Xingxue's amnesia would lead to disaster when the strain became too much. The two fiendlings were so anxious they were practically scratching their faces off.

Wu Xingxue clutched the blanket to his chest and stared at them woodenly. *Stop talking. I already know. Rather than acting like nervous fools, why don't you two hurry up and leave the carriage.*

While the two fools stood to do exactly what Wu Xingxue had hoped, they continued to talk and gesticulate. "At any rate, we just have times where it's like, uh, you know…"

They both hemmed and hawed more, searching for the right words.

"Tribulation," the Tianxiu Immortal's deep voice rang out, providing the missing word.

Wu Xingxue's eyelashes fluttered, and he briefly considered throwing the thick blanket over Xiao Fuxuan's head.

Chapter 34:
Bazaar

NING HUAISHAN AND FANG CHU were lifting the woolen curtain to step outside when they heard Xiao Fuxuan say “Tribulation.”

Their reactions were even stronger than Wu Xingxue’s. Question marks might as well have exploded like fireworks over their heads, and they missed the step down from the carriage entirely. Both of them nearly fell into the dirt right before their own lair. Ning Huaishan grabbed the doorframe to stop himself from face-planting, then pushed the curtain aside and stuck his head back into the cabin.

“How do you know about that?!” he asked after his initial shock subsided. His eyes, already large to begin with, were so wide they looked ready to pop out of his head. He stared incredulously at Xiao Fuxuan.

Fang Chu ducked back through the curtain as well, his brows furrowed. “How could Tianxiu possibly know about tribulation?!”

An uncertain Yi Wusheng joined in. “Excuse me, what does ‘tribulation’ mean? This is the first time I’ve ever heard of it.”

“Obviously!” Ning Huaishan snapped. “We can’t exactly let you cultivation clan types hear about it, can we?”

Yi Wusheng remained confused.

Fiends dealing with their tribulation had to be careful lest someone take advantage of their temporary vulnerability. Those cultivating the infernal arts in Nightgleam took pains to conceal this weakness when traveling outside the city. No fiend in his right mind would reveal this information to outsiders,

least of all cultivators on the celestial path. Besides, the term "tribulation" was just a term adopted by fiends over time; they saw the gnawing of vengeful spirits as a kind of trial and named it accordingly. If cultivators heard about it, they'd probably cheer and refer to it as "karmic retribution."

Wu Xingxue gleaned one thing from this series of questions: The word "tribulation" should never have come out of Xiao Fuxuan's mouth. As for how he possibly knew—*that* was a good question. Clutching the woolen blanket to himself, Wu Xingxue sifted through the remnants of his dream, especially Sang Yu's suggestive tone each time he'd mentioned the Tianxiu Immortal.

At this rate, Wu Xingxue feared there was nowhere left in the carriage for him to hide, and those two clueless numskulls *kept* yammering on.

"This can't be, Tianxiu! H-how did you ever find out about tribulations? Who let the cat out of the bag?!"

Xiao Fuxuan disregarded their questions and pushed the woolen curtain aside with his sword. "Step down," he said to Wu Xingxue.

Wu Xingxue looked at Xiao Fuxuan, dropped the blanket, and moved toward the door. When ducking beneath Xiao Fuxuan's sword to leave the carriage, Wu Xingxue caught the immortal stealing a glance at him. In a low tone, only a breath away, Xiao Fuxuan answered Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu's question:

"I just happened to know."

Wu Xingxue's heart skipped a beat.

Xiao Fuxuan spoke louder the next time. "Put on an overcoat."

Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu cocked their heads. Xiao Fuxuan's command came out of nowhere and was addressed to no one in particular. Their faces remained flat until they processed that Xiao Fuxuan was speaking to their archon. They wanted to say something, but what *could* they say? They watched silently as Wu Xingxue paused to give Xiao Fuxuan an inscrutable look. Without another word, he turned and stepped back into the cabin.

Yi Wusheng grabbed the overcoat from the carriage's storage and handed it over. "I may not know what a tribulation is, but if it involves an unbearable chill, you should wear warmer clothes. If you don't mind, sir, maybe you could describe what it feels like and how the symptoms might be suppressed? I have few possessions, but I do have an abundance of pills that could be useful."

When Yi Wusheng finished speaking, it was so quiet inside the cabin that one could hear a pin drop. Yi Wusheng faltered, confusion painted on his face. "What's wrong?"

As though coordinated in advance, the fiendlings simultaneously tipped their faces toward the ground. They weren't about to interject.

While they waited for the topic to change, they noticed that the Tianxiu Immortal was staying just as resolutely silent as they were. Yes, Xiao Fuxuan doled out his words as sparingly as gold coins, but it was evident that his current silence was borne of a reluctance to utter the unspeakable. Almost as if he knew not only what a tribulation was but how it might be subjugated.

Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu exchanged a look. *What the hell?*

Before they had a chance to consider it further, Wu Xingxue spoke up.

“To be quite honest, I don’t remember anything about tribulations nor what they feel like. But please spare me the elixirs, doctor. I appreciate your kindness, but I don’t like taking pills.” With that, Wu Xingxue wrapped himself in the overcoat and hastened out of the carriage.

His underlings also darted out, then sidled up next to him.

“Archon, it’s so weird, but it’s like the Tianxiu Immortal knows everything!”

“He even seems to know how to handle a tribulation—”

“Shut your mouths, both of you,” Wu Xingxue interrupted in an eerily soft tone. The hair stood up on the backs of their necks. That was the tone they feared most. It silenced them instantly.

Quiet at last, Wu Xingxue thought with relief. The cold nighttime breeze, wet with rain, swept over his face and chilled his ears. Thinking back, in the carriage, he’d felt heat prickle the tips of his ears and sides of his neck.

A sword clinked behind him as Xiao Fuxuan exited the carriage. Wu Xingxue scanned his surroundings and noted out of the corner of his eye that Xiao Fuxuan stayed beside the carriage, just a few steps away. He looked in Wu Xingxue’s direction but did not approach.

“Hey, what are all those people doing by the relay station?” Ning Huaishan suddenly wondered.

“Hmm?” Wu Xingxue turned in that direction.

Their carriage had stopped by a series of hitching posts covered by a canopy. The entrance to Nightgleam was not too far past them. High walls loomed in the near distance, their tops crowned with crenelated parapets. Beyond that stood two pointed towers hung with bells that swayed in the

winter winds. Their soft clanging cut through the mist. A giant set of black iron doors sat in the middle of the high wall bordered with several dozen hanging green lanterns—or what Wu Xingxue thought were lanterns.

As he gazed at the lights, he realized they were foxfires levitating in the rain. Many dark silhouettes moved in the gaps between foxfires.

"Who are those people?" Wu Xingxue asked. "Guards?"

But Nightgleam is a fiends' lair. What kind of fiends' lair needs guards?

Right on cue, Ning Huaishan chimed in. "Nightgleam didn't used to have guards. You put the tealfire lamps in place, Archon, and the black bells on the towers too. If anyone from Urbs Caelestia tries to enter Nightgleam, the bells ring and the tealfire lamps grow into a wall of fire that stretches for a hundred miles. We only got guards later on."

"How come?"

"Well, um, you were in that hellhole, you know, the Northern Domain of Tealspire, and we didn't know when you'd be back. A lot of people were worried that the tealfire lamps and black bells wouldn't last long enough, so…"

That was the most tactful way to put it, but Wu Xingxue inferred the bottom line: The fiends of Nightgleam believed he was a goner and couldn't trust his protections any longer. But only someone of sufficient influence in Nightgleam would have the authority to arrange for guards. Wu Xingxue beckoned Ning Huaishan closer.

"Let me ask one thing more. Who's the archon of Nightgleam now?"

Ning Huaishan curled his lip and replied without thinking. "Xueli." Only when Fang Chu elbowed him hard in the ribs did Ning Huaishan take in

what he'd said. "Archon…"

Wu Xingxue wasn't surprised. After he'd been thrown into the Northern Domain of Tealspire, everyone had assumed he was doomed. The position of archon could not remain vacant. There were so many fiends and cultivators of the infernal path that it was inevitable some would fight to become the new archon. He recalled Ning Huaishan's hurry to drag him back to Nightgleam when they first left Tealspire and guessed that this had been the reason.

"Xueli?" Yi Wusheng echoed. "Xueli…"

For the twenty years Yi Wusheng had been possessed by a fiend, he'd lived in a fog of confusion. But before he'd regained his lucidity, he hadn't known who the archon of Nightgleam was. Despite that, the sound of the name was familiar anyway. He repeated it several more times.

"Ah! A son of an old friend of mine has the same name," Yi Wusheng said suddenly.

"Is that old friend of yours a Feng?" asked Fang Chu.

Yi Wusheng nodded. "He is. The Fengs and the Huas have been friends for generations. The last Feng Clan matriarch had two sons and one daughter. Her eldest son, Feng Feishi, her beloved daughter, Feng Juyan, and her youngest son, Feng Xueli."

"Yeah, that's him," replied Fang Chu.

Yi Wusheng paled. "What do you mean?!"

"I mean it's the same Feng Xueli. He turned on his family for some reason, entered the infernal path, and came to Nightgleam. He dropped his family name, so now he's just Xueli. Nightgleam hasn't had any greater

archfiends of note for twenty-five years now, so he got lucky and became the new archon."

"It's not just that!" Ning Huaishan cried. His face stretched longer than a donkey's; he burned with rage at the thought of it. "When he came to Nightgleam, Xueli refused to build his own estate. No, he was dead set on claiming the archon's home for himself. If Fly-On-By hadn't sealed itself off after the archon left, he'd have moved in a while ago!"

This was why Ning Huaishan despised the sight of Xueli. He and Fang Chu had dreamed of the day Wu Xingxue would return to the city and knock that scoundrel down a peg or two. Considering what the archon was capable of, he would no doubt put a stop to Xueli riding roughshod over Nightgleam. Unfortunately, Wu Xingxue didn't remember a thing about his past and was on his tribulation, so now was not the best time to reveal himself or ambush Xueli.

Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu were about to advise Wu Xingxue to use a glamour to alter his appearance so they could pass through the relay station, but before they could speak, a sudden wind gusted behind them—a nether wind reeking of death.

Wu Xingxue caught the scent and wrinkled his nose. He was reminded of Sang Yu's estate in his dream. *This* was the smell of a necromancer.

When Wu Xingxue raised his gaze again, the shadowy figures by the wall were gone, replaced instead by several dozen black-robed figures. They had a ghastly pallor and conspicuous black lines encircling their necks, as though their heads had been removed and sewn back on. Upon closer inspection, the circles were not rows of stitches, but coffin studs that protruded from their skin.

“So, those are the new archon’s guards,” Wu Xingxue said, tilting his head to the side as he considered them. “What an ugly bunch.”

Wu Xingxue was surprised not to hear Ning Huaishan pipe up in agreement. *Apparently, even he has the occasional prudent moment*.

Then, he heard Ning Huaishan’s voice come from an unexpected direction. “We’ve only been gone a few days. How can there be that many more guards?”

Wu Xingxue fell silent. Ning Huaishan, who’d been huddled beside his archon mere moments before, had walked several steps away. So who did Wu Xingxue sense next to him listening to his nonsense? He turned his head and was startled to find Xiao Fuxuan there with his sword in one hand.

“Weren’t you just by the carriage?” Wu Xingxue asked. “What are you doing here?”

“You never looked back at me, so how did you know I was standing by the carriage?”

Wu Xingxue opened and closed his mouth without uttering a word. That familiar sensation he could not name surfaced again. He vaguely sensed that the Tianxiu Immortal was unhappy about something, though he’d been fine when Wu Xingxue first woke up. He thought back. Xiao Fuxuan’s mood seemed to have changed after Wu Xingxue had told Yi Wusheng he didn’t remember tribulations and then hurried off the carriage.

Wu Xingxue was dumbfounded. *Um…*

He was an archfiend, so presumably he didn’t care whether anyone else was happy or not, and he had no idea what to say in a situation like this,

anyway. He decided to feign ignorance. He pursed his lips but opened them again a moment later. “Why did you come over here?”

Xiao Fuxuan lifted an eyebrow. “To give you a new face.”

Huh? What?

“Don’t move,” Xiao Fuxuan ordered quietly.

Wu Xingxue’s silent questions were answered when he overheard Nightgleam’s approaching guard captain call out to Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu. Flames hovered over the guard’s palms, casting light over the party. As Wu Xingxue’s right-hand men, Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu were known to most of Nightgleam, but the captain wanted to check out the three strangers.

“There’s been a disturbance in Blossomfell Terrace, so the archon ordered us to strengthen security at the gates just in case it attracts anything,” explained the guard captain. “Of course, we have no issue with you two coming in, but the others…”

The captain was too close for Xiao Fuxuan to alter Wu Xingxue’s face without drawing attention.

We’re doomed, Wu Xingxue thought.

Their original plan had been to sneak into Blossomfell Terrace, find some jadehaem, and repair the Dreambell. Everything else could wait until after Wu Xingxue unraveled the dream of Magpie Haven that had taken his memories. But their cover was about to be blown. Everyone in Nightgleam knew his face. And if his dream of the past had been at all accurate, most of Nightgleam probably knew Xiao Fuxuan as well. Not even Yi Wusheng was safe. Since he was a well-known elder of a prestigious cultivation clan, a few fiends were sure to recognize him. They weren’t just failing to keep a low

profile; they were practically announcing a challenge to the entire city of Nightgleam.

The guard stepped closer, foxfire spilling from his palm. At that moment, two words escaped Xiao Fuxuan's lips:

"It's done."

Wu Xingxue looked down at Xiao Fuxuan's hand, which hadn't left his side.

What's done? You haven't even moved, so what do you mean "it's done"? He turned to Yi Wusheng, who was nearby. The cloth scarf still covered his mouth and nose, but Wu Xingxue could see that the eyes above looked different—like he was just some frail scholar possessed by a fiend. Wu Xingxue squinted as the light from the guard's palm shone on their faces.

The guard sucked in a breath through his teeth. "Those eyes…why do I feel like I've seen them before?" he muttered to another guard.

Wu Xingxue saw Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu grip their swords as if ready to lash out at any time. But while the tension thickened, the other guard scoffed.

"Because you always think that! It's been two days of you thinking half the people we meet are someone you've seen before."

The guards studied Wu Xingxue a little longer before they turned the light on Xiao Fuxuan. Wu Xingxue was certain that Xiao Fuxuan had already altered his own face beyond recognition, just as he had Yi Wusheng's.

"You done checking yet?" Ning Huaishan said, annoyed. "You sure are taking your time. I already told you, we got hungry on our way back, so we

grabbed a few people and brought them with us. Who else could I possibly have with me?"

It was evident that Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu had some standing in Nightgleam. Noticing their impatience, the guards moved aside to let them pass.

"Oh, right," one of the guards called after them. "Remember, when you head to the city, don't take the path through Blossomfell Terrace. The archon opened up another path to the right."

"What was the disturbance in Blossomfell Terrace?" Ning Huaishan asked.

"Nothing new, it's just that there's firelight over the mountain again."

"Firelight?"

"Uh-huh."

Yi Wusheng had said that firelight once shone over the ashes of the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar on the third day of the Third Month each year—the anniversary of the wildfire. According to him, the spectral wildfire had been so realistic that cultivators had traveled there armed with swords only to find scorched terraces, devoid of inhabitants. However, he'd also said that the phenomenon stopped once Blossomfell Terrace became the entrance to Nightgleam. If the guards were correct, did that mean that the firelight was back for the first time in hundreds of years?

"It looked fine when we left a few days ago," said Ning Huaishan.

"It started just over a day ago," replied the guard.

Just over a day ago? Wu Xingxue considered this. *That was when we left the Valley of Laments. Could it be a coincidence, or is there some*

connection between the events?

He snapped out of his thoughts as the group reached the huge set of iron doors. The tealfire lamps that he'd allegedly set up hovered silently to either side, bobbing as they approached as if eager to flare into action.

"Archon, do you still remember how to command the tealfire lamps?" Ning Huaishan whispered now that the guards were gone.

"No, I completely forgot," Wu Xingxue said honestly. "What even are they?"

Ning Huaishan's face spoke volumes as he stared at Wu Xingxue.

"They… Well, the tealfire lamps are extremely sensitive to celestial energy. For hundreds of years, they've supposedly caught every celestial that wanted to pass through these doors without a mistake. They won't be easy to fool." Ning Huaishan eyed the Tianxiu Immortal and lowered his voice to a mere shadow. "If you could remember how to use them, you could make an exception for that guy and sneak him through. But you don't remember, so now what? I hear that it's terrifying when tealfire lamps flare up. I don't want to die here, please, I—"

Halfway through his whining, Ning Huaishan's eyes went wide, and his voice flew up so high it nearly cracked.

Wu Xingxue followed his gaze to Xiao Fuxuan, who was directly in front of the tealfire lamps. He paused, lifted his foot, and kept walking. His longsword clanged softly in its scabbard, and his long black boots showed beneath the fluttering hems of his robes. The tealfire lamps on both sides blinked a few times as though experiencing a moment of uncertainty, then quickly stilled. They seemed oblivious that they'd just let an immortal pass.

Ning Huaishan and Fang Chu gaped after him, overwhelmed with questions.

"Archon, how come he can go in?"

"How can he just pass through like that? You didn't even do anything!"

"It didn't even look like this was his first time!"

"Archon?!"

They turned to look at their archon, his slender neck and chin hidden behind his silvery white fox-fur coat.

"No idea," he drawled. "Are you two going to move or what?"

There was a stunned pause before they slumped forward. "We're… we're moving."

As they passed through the heavy doors, Wu Xingxue mulled over their questions. He could guess why Xiao Fuxuan was allowed in and why it did not appear to be the first time. In his dream, Sang Yu said that his spies had seen the Tianxiu Immortal at Fly-On-By. If the dream was a memory, then Xiao Fuxuan had visited Nightgleam before without disturbing the tealfire lamps and being consumed by foxfire. Ning Huaishan said that Wu Xingxue had set up the tealfire lamps himself, so if anyone had tampered with them, he was the most likely culprit.

There was only one explanation: Long ago, as the archon of Nightgleam, Wu Xingxue had made an exception for Xiao Fuxuan.

Wu Xingxue's footsteps came to a halt.

He had been following the shadows ahead of him, but when he looked up with a start, he found himself in a thick mountain fog that was remarkably

cold and too thick to be natural. They'd somehow stepped onto a mountain path.

He watched Xiao Fuxuan's figure vanish into the pale white mist with a single step. Wu Xingxue trailed him into the fog, which slid against his neck and down his spine like a giant drop of freezing water. Shocked by the cold, he closed his eyes for a second and opened them again to find the world before him transformed.

The thick fog was behind him now. A vine-draped white boundary stone at his feet was beautifully inscribed with the words *Blossomfell Terrace*. Stretched in front of him like a dragon, a serpentine trail of orange lanterns wound toward the horizon. They illuminated indistinct rows of houses with open windows, streets lined with storefronts and market booths, and silhouettes moving to and fro. Banners fluttered amid the mountain shadows, and among them was a long banner carrying three words: *Mount Blossomfell Bazaar*.

Wu Xingxue stood still for a moment, then stepped toward the banner. When he ducked past it, a cacophony of lively voices washed over him like a sudden tide over the Boundless Sea. He still had no memories, yet when he heard those voices, he thought, *Ah, this is it—this is the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar of yore.*

But if the real Mount Blossomfell Bazaar had burned down and vanished hundreds of years ago, what was he looking at now? When they'd passed through the city gates earlier, the guard had mentioned strange disturbances in Blossomfell Terrace, including recent sightings of lantern light. Had Wu Xingxue unwittingly entered an illusion?

No, this was far too realistic to be a mere illusion. The bazaar's endless, sprawling thoroughfare did not appear to be built on a mountain path. White paving stones lined the street, so loosely laid that they rocked minutely when he stepped on their edges and fell softly back into place when he removed his weight. The building nearest to him was a three-story teahouse, and though it was built against a mountainside, it didn't tilt. Long strings of lanterns hung from the flying eaves; he could hear the voices of many people chatting and laughing within. A storyteller with distinct cheekbones sat at the front of the house holding a hard wooden-block gavel, telling his tale with enthusiasm-propelled spittle. A waiter with a white towel over his shoulders peddled his wares from a bare stall outside the teahouse. His cries tunneled into Wu Xingxue's ears.

"Come, get your spirit tea brewed from the celestial springs of Blossomfell Terrace! A single pot will cure all ills, and two will keep you alive for a thousand years without ever getting sick!"

Wu Xingxue stared at it all without a word. Finally, unable to resist any longer, he reached out and touched the edges of the banner fluttering outside the tea stall. The illusion was amazing—even the rough woven texture of the canvas was vivid and tactile.

"Squire, please don't pull on our shop's banner," the waiter said to him. "Having some tea? Our snacks are the absolute best, and you can only find them here at the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar!"

Wu Xingxue shook his head, about to say there was no need when he spotted a tall man about fifty feet ahead of him. The man lifted his sword to push a fluttering canopy aside, then turned sideways to make room for an old man pushing a shop cart. One more step and he'd disappear into the crowd.

Taking broad strides to close the distance, Wu Xingxue began to call out after him.

"Xiao—"

As the word left Wu Xingxue's mouth, he felt a tap on his shoulder followed by a palm gently covering his mouth. He stepped backward in surprise and found his spine enveloped in a nest of heat.

"You can't call for that one," Xiao Fuxuan whispered right next to his ear. "He's an illusion."

Chapter 35:
Inn

A FRAGMENTED SCENE FLASHED through Wu Xingxue's mind: A different moment when Xiao Fuxuan had held him from behind, pressing his fingers to Wu Xingxue's lips to silence him. Wu Xingxue even recalled the sensation of Xiao Fuxuan's thumb brushing the tip of his nose and the way the immortal's shallow breath had swept the shell of his ear.

Wu Xingxue's shoulders tensed as he opened his mouth beneath Xiao Fuxuan's palm.

"Xiao Fuxuan, do you know how reckless it is to touch an archfiend from behind?" A fiend's back was vulnerable, so touching it risked inciting an instinctive, fatal attack.

"I know." Xiao Fuxuan fell quiet, then continued deliberately. "But Wu Xingxue…you withdrew your vital force."

Wu Xingue snapped out of the memory to find the same thing was true. He had reflexively curled his fingers into claws the moment he'd felt the tap on his shoulder, but he'd retracted his vital force upon feeling Xiao Fuxuan's chest and hearing his voice.

Before Wu Xingxue knew what was happening, Xiao Fuxuan had whisked him into a corner behind a wall that blocked the wind and dampened the din of the bazaar. In the distance, steam billowed from the snack stand.

"Is this really an illusion?" Wu Xingxue asked.

Xiao Fuxuan's warm hand fell from his lips.

“What did you say?” asked Xiao Fuxuan. “I couldn’t hear you. It’s too noisy out there.”

“I said, is this really an illusion? It seems too realistic.” Wu Xingxue continued to study the scene beyond the wall for a little while.

“Kind of.”

“What do you mean?”

“The vision is an illusion, but the scene it depicts was real.”

After a moment of silence, Wu Xingxue faced Xiao Fuxuan. “Lord Immortal, just using more words doesn’t make it an explanation.”

Xiao Fuxuan held his tongue ruefully as he looked back at Wu Xingxue for a time. “Mount Blossomfell Bazaar is long gone, so this vision is merely a tangible illusion. But the scene of the town itself isn’t spun from whole cloth. It shows a specific day in Blossomfell Terrace.”

Wu Xingxue returned his attention to the bazaar. *What specific day?*

The sequence of events was far too coincidental—the moment they’d emerged from the Valley of Laments, a strange disturbance had overtaken Blossomfell Terrace. In the past, such disturbances had been limited to the sudden appearance of firelight, but when *they* stepped into the mountains, the disturbance had become a day from Blossomfell Terrace’s past. A single coincidence could be chalked up to chance, but multiple related coincidences suggested intent. Why this specific day? Did someone want them to see or do something?

“Xiao Fuxuan, do you have a good memory?” Wu Xingxue eventually asked.

Xiao Fuxuan did not reply right away, once more at a loss for words. Finally, he said, “I do not know which day it is.”

“But I haven’t asked you that yet.”

“You don’t have to. It’s written all over your face.”

Fine. Wu Xingxue had wanted to ask precisely that question, but the Tianxiu Immortal had beaten him to it, leaving him dissatisfied with the exchange. He directed his attention toward the street market instead. The tall figure he’d seen earlier was gone, swallowed in the tide of people.

“Was the man you stopped me from calling *you*?” he asked without looking back. Then, he muttered to himself, “It had to be you. Not like I could mistake you for someone else.”

“And why is that?”

Wu Xingxue turned to look at Xiao Fuxuan. “Huh?”

Xiao Fuxuan stopped observing the street market and cast his eyes down toward Wu Xingxue. “Why couldn’t you mistake me for someone else?”

Wu Xingxue’s lips parted, but he did not answer. The waiter outside the teahouse began shouting his drawn-out pitch for spirit tea again, shattering the mood. Wu Xingxue whipped around and shot a quick glance in that direction before changing the subject.

“Since you’ve been here before, do you still remember…”

He trailed off when he caught Xiao Fuxuan looking at the tea stand, his face as cold and stiff as a coffin lid. Wu Xingxue stared at him, then began to laugh. It was the first time he’d genuinely laughed since he’d woken up in the

Northern Domain of Tealspire—a pure sound, not intended to intimidate, show contempt, express exasperation, or hide his plotting.

Xiao Fuxuan withdrew his gaze from the tea stand to focus on Wu Xingxue and his laughter. He didn't speak for quite a long time.

"Are you done? If so, we're leaving." With that, Xiao Fuxuan took his sword and stepped out from behind the wall. Wu Xingxue followed one step behind.

“Hey, I wasn’t done asking you questions yet!” he said, his voice still colored with laughter. Xiao Fuxuan existed within this illusion, so Wu Xingxue wanted to ask if he recalled anything strange about that day at the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar. Then again, hundreds of years had passed since, so how much could he possibly remember? “Never mind, never mind. Forget I said anything.”

But Xiao Fuxuan seemed to know what he was thinking. “I’ve been to this bazaar many times.” With nothing but a silhouette to go by, he really couldn’t say which day this was, let alone what had happened.

Wu Xingxue nodded. “So, where are we going now?” he asked as they stepped onto higher ground.

From this vantage point, Wu Xingxue could look out over the entire throng of people. Some distance away, he once more caught sight of that familiar figure—between his height and his striking appearance, Xiao Fuxuan stood out from the crowd.

“Are we following you?” Wu Xingxue asked, marveling over the oddity of the question.

“Mm-hmm,” Xiao Fuxuan answered, reluctant to say more.

“Then why didn’t we just follow you in the first place? Why waste time dragging me into a corner?” This sounded even odder than his previous question.

Xiao Fuxuan deigned to spare a few more of his precious words, replying, “I’d notice us following if we got too close.”

That’s true, Wu Xingxue thought. The illusion’s Tianxiu Immortal was still the Tianxiu Immortal, and there was no way he’d miss two people

following so closely behind him. Worse, when he confronted his stalkers and saw that one was identical to himself, he was far more likely to kill them at once than to engage them in battle or give them a chance to explain. No wonder Xiao Fuxuan had covered Wu Xingxue's mouth.

The Mount Blossomfell Bazaar was rumored to cover four miles, an unbroken string of lights and shops as far as the eyes could see. They'd walked through only a half mile of flickering lantern light when a potent fragrance suddenly overwhelmed them. It nearly obliterated every other smell on the street and gave Wu Xingxue an instant headache. He clapped his hand over his nose.

"Someone must've tipped over a whole cart of cosmetics," he whispered.

Sure enough, a chorus of frustrated grumbles arose just ahead of them. The crowd slowed, curious to see the cause of the commotion and bringing everything to a standstill. A shop attendant dashed over to a table outside a stall and climbed atop like a skinny monkey.

"Customers, please be patient, there's no need to panic! Please calm down and stop shouting. That smell is the blush from the Li's shop next door. Their cart struck a falling rock and overturned, scattering a full shipment of cosmetics. They're busy cleaning it up right now."

"There are falling rocks in Mount Blossomfell Bazaar?" That didn't make sense to Wu Xingxue. With his fingers pressed to his nose, his voice was muffled; Xiao Fuxuan could only hear him by leaning in close.

"It is indeed strange," Xiao Fuxuan said near Wu Xingxue's ear.

The bazaar took place every year, so every building, shop, and stall was built against the mountainside. The vendors knew full well which areas

were stable and which were hazardous. The Mount Blossomfell Bazaar would have never become such a grand and lively event had there been the threat of rocks falling willy-nilly.

Many in the crowd were curious as well. “Aren’t the roofs of these houses fortified by the cultivation clans?” someone asked. “Why would rocks be falling? All these years and I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Correct,” said the waiter. “The boss has already sent a messenger to the Feng Clan for help. Please, everyone, don’t worry.”

“The Feng Clan again?”

Wu Xingxue could not recall many clans beyond the recently encountered Hua Clan, but he remembered the Nightgleam guards saying that Xueli, the new archon, was from the Feng Clan.

“If there’s trouble at the bazaar, they seek help from the nearest and most influential cultivation clan,” Xiao Fuxuan explained.

As they spoke, the illusory Xiao Fuxuan they were trailing stopped and scanned the crowd behind him. This time, Wu Xingxue was the one to react swiftly. He grabbed Xiao Fuxuan, dragged him into the lobby of the nearest inn, and ducked behind a pillar.

Compared to the crowded street outside, the lobby was quite deserted. The only other person there was a middle-aged man with heavy bags under his eyes who sat behind a wooden counter, noisily sliding the beads on his abacus. When he heard them enter, he didn’t look up but called out to the porter in a gravelly drawl.

“Porter, we’ve got guests.”

Wu Xingxue planned only to hide there for a moment before leaving, but then he noticed a bell hanging from a high rack on the counter. Made of white jade, it glowed with a warm luster in the lamplight. At first glance, it looked a lot like his Dreambell. In the time it took him to examine it, a plump figure pounded down the wooden stairs with a series of thumps.

"What do you mean there's a guest? We have more guests? What an odd couple of days it's been at our inn!" the porter said.

He was portly and quite young, and he rolled over to them like a big ball, with so much momentum he almost ran into them headlong. Wu Xingxue held out an ice-cold hand to stop him, and at its touch, the boy shuddered. Only then did he focus in on his two new guests. He halted on the spot, then glanced back and forth between Xiao Fuxuan and Wu Xingxue. Without a word, he repeatedly opened and closed his mouth.

"What's the matter with you?" Wu Xingxue asked, rubbing his fingertips together. *Are my hands so cold they froze his brain?*

The porter collected himself and waved his hands. "N-no, it's nothing."

Whether it was because he was so close and his gestures so dramatic or because the scent of cosmetics was far less potent inside the lobby, Wu Xingxue caught an almost imperceptible odor wafting from the porter's waving hands. It passed almost before he noticed it and vanished without a trace. Anyone else might have missed it, but not Wu Xingxue. His recent dream had left an intense impression of this exact smell, which he'd also noticed at the entrance to Nightgleam. For the third time that day, Wu Xingxue breathed in the damp mustiness exclusive to necromancers like Sang Yu or Xueli.

This is no ordinary inn, Wu Xingxue thought.

The porter stammered for so long that he drew the innkeeper's attention. The middle-aged man behind the counter abandoned his abacus to address them. "Porter, do not neglect our guests. Are you gentlemen here to stay for the night?"

Wu Xingxue thought about that strange musty smell and the Dreambell lookalike hanging over the counter. He was about to say yes when the innkeeper looked up. As the man laid his eyes on his new guests, he opened and closed his mouth exactly as the porter had. A moment later, he managed to speak, though his voice was an octave higher.

"Didn't you two just check out?"

Wu Xingxue swallowed his reply right back down. *Huh?*

Chapter 36:
Dead of Night

WHAT DO YOU MEAN we just checked out? And did we check out of one room or two?

Wu Xingxue's head swirled with questions, none of them appropriate to ask unless he wanted to ensure that the innkeeper never had another good night's sleep. The guests he'd just checked out moments earlier returning to interrogate him about themselves as if they were entirely different people? He'd think he was losing his mind—or, worse, mistake them for monsters and create a scene. With a shriek, he could call for the cultivation clans to surround the place and capture them.

Xiao Fuxuan had said this was an illusion of a once-real scene. Wu Xingxue didn't know how they might affect this place if they caused a ruckus, but he knew it wouldn't be good. It was far more prudent to keep a low profile.

He forcibly replaced his inquisitive expression with an airtight mask of pure calm, quashed his curiosity, and looked at the innkeeper with a raised eyebrow. *What's the matter with you?* his expression suggested. *Of course we're the same people who left the inn moments earlier. Who else could we possibly be?*

The innkeeper stared at him another beat, then shook his head to chase away his foolish thoughts. "What, did you two change your minds and decide to stay another night?" he asked dryly.

As Wu Xingxue tried and failed to think up an excuse to decline and head for the exit, Xiao Fuxuan replied to the innkeeper instead.

"Yes, please," he said.

The innkeeper's tone jumped another octave. "Y-you two are really going to stay another night?"

Huh? Can't he just give me a few seconds to think? thought Wu Xingxue, but Lord Tianxiu did not give him even one.

"Mm-hmm," Xiao Fuxuan replied.

Wu Xingxue stared at Xiao Fuxuan, who met his gaze for just a moment. Quietly, his thin lips barely moving, he whispered, "We'll talk upstairs."

Fine. Wu Xingxue condescended to give a slight nod. One downside of not having any memories was that, every once in a while, he had to be obedient and trust someone who knew more. Though a proper archfiend could hardly be expected to be law-abiding and trusting, Wu Xingxue had been well-behaved throughout this entire journey. Someone who didn't know him might even mistake him for a modest, refined gentleman—even if anyone from Nightgleam hearing him described as such would die from the shock.

Xiao Fuxuan's answer was concise, but the innkeeper responded oddly. The look on his face was begrudging, as if hosting the guests another night was not at all to his liking. His expression drew Wu Xingxue's attention, so he narrowed his eyes and observed. The innkeeper click-clacked his abacus a couple more times, then grabbed the ash-blue guest ledger off the table, licked a finger, flipped its sandy yellow pages open, and picked up a brush. He seemed to be in early middle age. His black hair was untouched by gray,

but his movements and speech were slow and plodding; unlike the lively little porter, he bore a heavy air of decrepitude.

The innkeeper dipped his brush in ink and peered up at them. “Will you gentlemen be sharing a room again?”

“Yes,” said Xiao Fuxuan.

When he heard this answer, Wu Xingxue lost all interest in the innkeeper and blinked at Xiao Fuxuan. Taking advantage of an angle at which the innkeeper could not see his face, Wu Xingxue mouthed the words *One room?*

Xiao Fuxuan shot him a quick look, long enough to read Wu Xingxue’s lips and understand his question. Wu Xingxue waited for several seconds, but unlike last time, Xiao Fuxuan did not offer a *“We’ll talk upstairs”*—a tacit admission that they had indeed shared a room the preceding night. Wu Xingxue pursed his lips and looked away.

The innkeeper chose one key from a huge ring of copper keys and handed it to the porter. He took it and led the two guests—once departed, now returned—to the second floor.

At the door, the porter hemmed and hawed until his cheeks turned red. “Um, our inn, it d-doesn’t get a lot of guests. You two gentlemen left just an hour or two ago, so I-I haven’t cleaned the room yet!” While he spoke, he shot a lightning-quick glance at the counter downstairs, like he feared the innkeeper would overhear him admit to slacking off. “If you’re not in a hurry, would you mind giving me a little while? I’ll tidy up and bring a new pot of hot tea—”

His words cut off as he felt a frigid touch on his hand. He shivered, recognizing the freezing sensation from when the dashing young guest had

touched him earlier. The key he'd been holding was gone. Puzzled, he turned just in time to see Wu Xingxue insert the stolen key into the lock, twist it, and enter the room.

I guess you are *in a pretty big hurry*, thought the porter.

Wu Xingxue had no interest in the porter's thoughts; he was fixated on the revelation that he and Xiao Fuxuan had shared a room and wanted to see it before it was cleaned. As he passed through the door, he wondered if the room would look anything like Sang Yu's bedchamber. If so, he would have to butcher the inquisitive porter who was trying to peek into the room.

The porter had no idea he was courting death when he pulled the cloth towel from his shoulder and scampered through the door behind Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan. He was just about to start cleaning up when he stopped in his tracks.

"Wuh?"

The bed in this guest room was made, the chairs were tucked under the table, and the teacups on their tray were still upside down. This was the room they had stayed in, but nothing inside seemed to have been touched.

"What…?" The portly boy blinked and turned back to the two guests. He'd never had a guest clean up after themselves, let alone tidy the place to this extent. Could it be that they never stayed here? If so, why take the room?

Wu Xingxue was equally surprised, but his face remained expressionless. His gaze scoured over every corner of the room before he turned to the porter. "There's no need to clean. You may go."

The porter was thrilled. "Aye!" he replied, throwing the towel back over his shoulders and departing.

As soon as the bystander left, Wu Xingxue turned and glared at Xiao Fuxuan. *Well played, Tianxiu Immortal.* “Did you do that on purpose?”

Xiao Fuxuan raised his sword and touched it against the door. It closed at once, shutting the nighttime mountain winds out of the room. He walked to the table, bent his head, and flicked the lamp’s wick. The room brightened and even seemed to warm a bit, though maybe it was just Wu Xingxue’s imagination.

Xiao Fuxuan withdrew his hand from the lamp and finally raised his gaze to Wu Xingxue. “Did I do what on purpose?”

What Wu Xingxue wanted to say was: *When you agreed to one room, were you deliberately misleading me so I’d think we were here for something more than an innocent night’s sleep?* But he couldn’t say that out loud. Any misunderstanding had been resolved the second they opened the door to the untouched room, and the porter neither knew them nor was likely to care—surely he’d seen it all before. The only one who could be misled about the situation was Wu Xingxue.

Was he teasing me? He looked at Xiao Fuxuan beside the table. He seemed as indifferent as ever.

The lamp’s beady flame flickered. Wu Xingxue was curious whether the Tianxiu Immortal really had been at Fly-On-By during the tribulation in his dream. What would he have looked like? Like he did now? As soon as the question surfaced, Wu Xingxue knocked it aside. He turned his head away and blinked a few times to clear his head.

Forget it, he told himself.

“Why did you change your mind and decide to stay here for the night?” he asked just before a realization struck him. “Ah… You remembered which

visit this was, didn't you?"

After all, it's not as if you stayed at this particular inn every single time you came to the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar.

Sure enough, Xiao Fuxuan hummed an affirmation, adding after a brief silence, "This was the last time I came here."

Wu Xingxue paused in surprise. "The very last?"

Xiao Fuxuan nodded. "The next thing I heard about it was the news it'd burned to the ground in a wildfire."

That must be it, Wu Xingxue thought. *We must have been drawn into this illusion due to something that happened on this particular day.* "Did anything unusual or special happen back then?" he asked.

"No," Xiao Fuxuan responded mildly.

"No? Are you sure?"

"Mm-hmm."

Xiao Fuxuan truly recalled nothing unusual about that day: He ran into Rex Spiritus in the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar, and they donned glamours as usual to walk through the crowd unnoticed. Rex Spiritus was fatigued, as he had just spent significant celestial energy carrying out a heavenly edict. As night fell and the wind rose in the mountains, he grew cold, so they'd stopped at this inn with its sluggish, unwelcoming innkeeper and clumsy porter.

The room had a heating stove, and as the hour grew late and the dew grew heavy, he conjured hovering lamps in every corner. They hung like stars in the dark to warm the room. Rex Spiritus quickly became drowsy until he finally curled up and nodded off. His celestial energy circulated as he slept.

Xiao Fuxuan remained wide awake and leaned by the window with one leg propped up against the sill. Every once in a while, he glanced at the sleeping Rex Spiritus to make sure that his energy was circulating smoothly. If it were blocked, things could quickly go awry, but nothing troublesome happened. The night passed unremarkably, and if they hadn't returned to the inn, he would have never thought of that day again—and as he examined the memory now, the fact that nothing remarkable had happened was the most unusual thing of all.

Xiao Fuxuan was lost in thought when he suddenly frowned. "My memory of that night has been altered."

Wu Xingxue was taken aback. "By whom?"

The Tianxiu Immortal was the one figure in Urbs Caelestia equal in power to the Chief Immortal, and even those closest to him would find it extremely difficult to manipulate his memory. That made Wu Xingxue, with the Dreambell hanging from his belt, the obvious culprit.

What in the world could have happened here to make me modify Xiao Fuxuan's memories? Even more importantly, what took place in this inn that day, and how did that lead to Mount Blossomfell Bazaar becoming a swath of scorched earth?

These questions spiraled in Wu Xingxue's mind and refused to fade, so much so that even his dreams did not leave him in peace. Like choking vines or giant serpents, they crept higher and higher, invading with the stink of decay. Suddenly, mere hours before dawn, the odor overwhelmed him. He opened his eyes, but the damp mustiness lingered in the air, as if the dream still clung to him. The room was pitch black and still, the only sound his own

heartbeat and someone else's near-imperceptible breathing. He had fallen asleep facing the wall, and whoever was breathing was behind him.

His parted his lips and called out softly, "Xiao Fuxuan?"

He meant to ask why he'd turned out the light, but as he spoke, something felt off. Whoever was behind him wasn't Xiao Fuxuan, were they? The breathing was simply too close. Something was crouched by his bedside and staring at his back in dead silence.

With mounting dread, Wu Xingxue turned and met a pair of wide, unblinking eyes that were glazed a ghostly white.

Chapter 37:
Forced Confession

WHAT A BLESSING to have a ghost climb into my bed in the middle of the night! thought Wu Xingxue. A cursory glance around the room revealed that the Tianxiu Immortal was missing, which made sense; Xiao Fuxuan would never have let this ugly thing into the room. Disappointed, Wu Xingxue abandoned his attempt to look helpless—without Xiao Fuxuan around, there was no point—and vanished just as the thing crouching next to the bed was about to strike.

The creature's dead eyes blinked as it took in the now-empty bed. It looked left, right, and under the bed but found no trace of Wu Xingxue. While it searched, its eyeballs jerked about so rapidly beneath its decaying bluish-black eyelids they seemed in danger of rolling out of their sockets. It raised its head to search higher, which was when a voice rang out behind it.

"I'm back here."

The thing froze. Its dull eyes stopped moving as it curled its fingers into claws—only to feel a hand cold as hoarfrost, colder than death, seize it by the neck and scalp. The world turned upside down as its assailant dragged it through the air before slamming it hard to the ground. The freezing, baleful hand leaped from the back of the thing's neck to its throat. It fought back desperately, thrashing against the floor and leaving deep cracks, but no matter how hard it struggled, that pristine, pale hand remained perfectly still.

"How unfortunate for you," Wu Xingxue said. "I can't remember much anymore, and the only moves I recall are killing ones. You'd better stay put."

This was the very first time the creature had failed a haunting and gotten pinned to the ground—until now, it had never flinched at a threat. Out of nowhere, a cold wind raged, and the wooden window slammed open with a bang. Wu Xingxue spoke into the dark with the faintest hint of a smile in his voice, though what he had to say wasn't funny in the slightest:

"As for whoever is outside my window, I'm in a rather foul mood at the moment. You'd best get in here right now if you know what's good for you—and light the lamp while you're at it."

He was met with a long silence. Perhaps the person waiting outside the window was not accustomed to such demands. Eventually, they nudged open the door and groped their way to the table. They reached the long-extinguished oil lamp and lit it, illuminating the room and revealing themselves. It was the innkeeper.

Wu Xingxue half crouched on the floor with his white robes draped around him, his hand wrapped around the neck of the thing that had visited his bed. It was a male corpse that appeared to have been dead for quite some time. His head was swollen not from portliness but from bloat, and his skin was pale and thin, as if it had soaked in some kind of liquid for a long time. Wu Xingxue recognized the substance as embalming serum, concocted by cultivation clans to be poured into a corpse's sarcophagus to prevent decay. His face fell flat, and he saw that the cadaver was armed with a sword.

Releasing his grip on the cadaver's neck, he took away its sword and stood. The cadaver began to jerk its way up as well, but it stopped when it felt the tip of a sword lightly pierce its forehead.

"Did I say you could get up?" Wu Xingxue asked courteously, as if they were enjoying a casual chat. Though his tone was free of menace, his

baleful intent remained palpable. Neither the cadaver beneath his sword nor the innkeeper by the table dared to move. “Innkeeper, hand me that clean towel.”

The innkeeper stared, huge bags sagging beneath his fearful eyes. Gingerly, he reached for the towel and handed it over while maintaining as much distance as possible. He dared not move or speak and simply watched while Wu Xingxue wiped his hands on the towel.

Wu Xingxue wiped and wiped, then paused to gaze down quietly at his own slender wrists, which were pristine and dirt-free.

What is he looking at? wondered the innkeeper. *There’s nothing there*.

A frown formed on Wu Xingxue’s face as he continued to stare at his spotless skin.

He does seem to be in a dreadful mood, thought the alarmed innkeeper. He shrank back a bit more.

He had no way of knowing that Wu Xingxue had frowned precisely *because* his wrists were empty. Back at the Hua estate, Xiao Fuxuan had tied a silk thread and bell to Wu Xingxue’s wrist before projecting his spirit sense from his body. When Wu Xingxue tugged on the threads, Xiao Fuxuan returned at once. This time, Wu Xingxue had no bell to call Xiao Fuxuan, nor could he sense his presence anywhere in the inn.

Where did he go? Wu Xingxue wondered. He tossed the towel back onto the table, then appraised the innkeeper.

The innkeeper’s scalp prickled beneath his stare, and a chill ran straight up his spine. He was about to put up his hands and explain, but Wu Xingxue spoke first.

“Where is he?” he demanded.

The innkeeper froze. “Huh? Who?” What did that matter? He’d expected Wu Xingxue to ask the questions most people would ask if they came under threat in the dead of night: *What was this cadaver doing in my room? Why were you crouched outside my door? What were you trying to do?*

“I’m asking you,” Wu Xingxue said softly, “what happened to the man who came here with me. Did you see him?”

The innkeeper shook his head.

Wu Xingxue’s expression cooled again. While his face revealed no emotion, the gentle downward slant to his eyes emitted an air of disdain. The pressure around him intensified.

“I-I really didn’t see him,” the terrorized innkeeper stammered, the jut of his throat bobbing up and down as he swallowed.

Wu Xingxue’s voice got even softer. “Weren’t you peeping in from outside?”

“I-I…I only just came up. When I came up… When I came up…” The innkeeper wasn’t sure how to explain. “I wasn’t there long before I heard you say ‘I’m behind you,’ and then…you know what happened after that!”

Wu Xingxue’s expression only darkened. “And I’m supposed to just believe you?”

“It’s the truth, the truth!” the innkeeper insisted frantically. “If there’s even a shred of deceit, may I, um, may I be struck by lightning!”

Wu Xingxue believed him. In fact, he’d assumed the innkeeper was innocent before he opened his mouth. No one so easily reduced to groveling

could pose a threat to an immortal. Wu Xingxue knew the innkeeper had nothing to do with Xiao Fuxuan's disappearance, but he was irritated and wanted answers.

"What about you?" With a turn of the wrist, he stabbed down with the sword.

The cadaver snapped its eyes shut as the blade sliced a long, narrow wound into its scalp. Had it still been alive, it would be gushing blood. Though the injury wouldn't be fatal, it was close enough to scare anyone alive to tears.

"What are you, anyway?" Wu Xingxue asked as he crouched over the corpse. "When did you enter this room, and where did the man who was here go?"

The cadaver's dead eyes stared at him without blinking. It opened and closed its mouth, then pursed its lips. Finally, it shook its head. Wu Xingxue studied it for a moment, his brows knitted together. He leaned forward and pinched each of the cadaver's cheeks between his thumb and forefinger and pushed. The dead man's taut bottom jawbone popped open with a loud snap, the cave of its mouth yawning wide to reveal two rows of tightly set teeth and no tongue. Wu Xingxue moved his fingers along its neck and throat until he felt the hard bump of a stud beneath the corpse's hyoid bone. Tongueless and sealed with a stud—no wonder it couldn't speak. Xiao Fuxuan could make this cadaver speak whether it had a tongue or not, but alas, he was missing.

With his patience wearing thin, Wu Xingxue grabbed a cup of tea from the table and spilled it on the floor next to the cadaver's hand. "Write."

The cadaver moved a shaky finger aimlessly in the tea stain, swirling it over and over again.

“This thing, h-he can’t answer you,” the innkeeper said.

Wu Xingxue didn’t even lift his head. “Then could you? Someone said something to me earlier…”

Xiao Fuxuan had explained that this was an illusion, so it was best not to make too much commotion lest they disturb it and risk potentially dire consequences.

“He told me that it’s best not to make too much commotion here,” Wu Xingxue continued. “Now that he’s gone, I have no one left to ask. Tell me, what does ‘too much commotion’ mean? A skirmish? Murder?”

The innkeeper turned as pale and green as bok choy. “No! N-no, you mustn’t, please, I’ll—hey!” he blurted out. “I’ll tell you whatever you want. Everything!”

He warned Wu Xingxue that it was a long story, then started from the beginning.

“I’ve run this inn for so many years I’ve lost track, and it’s been perfectly calm the whole time. Nothing ever happened. Before all this, someone from a cultivation clan even checked the place for me and said I’d picked the best spot in all of Blossomfell Terrace, a blessed space where fortune and energy would gather. Then, one day, a jade branch grew from a crevice in the stones behind the inn. Even though it was just this tiny little thing…” The innkeeper measured out a space less than an inch long between his trembling thumb and forefinger. “I started to wonder, could it be a divine presence manifesting on this blessed ground? I asked the cultivator to come take another look, but he told me it wasn’t an auspicious sign. In fact, he said all the blessing in this spot had already scattered, and it was on the verge of

shifting from prosperity to decline, from fortune to misfortune. He even tried to convince me to move the inn elsewhere."

Of course, he hadn't bought that nonsense. The cultivator had just said the inn occupied blessed ground, but now he claimed the same ground was cursed out of nowhere? The innkeeper asked around and gathered information, consulted countless books—both those he understood and those he didn't—and even studied various creation myths. At last, he found an answer.

"I believe it's jadehaem, which you only see but once a century."

At those words, Wu Xingxue raised his eyes. Xiao Fuxuan had mentioned jadehaem in the past.

"If it really is jadehaem, it's the stuff of legend and highly auspicious," continued the innkeeper. "How could something so fortunate lead from prosperity to decline?! I ignored the cultivator, and I had no plans to move. But…well, it wasn't long before we had an incident." The innkeeper looked at Wu Xingxue's face. "A guest staying here vanished. We couldn't find a trace of him no matter how hard we looked.

"He was staying here with his daughter, you see. The little missy was so young she could barely even talk, and she cried so hard in the aftermath it was heartbreaking. Naturally, I had to try to find him, so I asked the cultivation clan for help again. All kinds of people come to the bazaar, so to avoid attracting too much attention, the cultivators stayed at the inn and secretly investigated, but then…" The innkeeper shot a look at Wu Xingxue like he wished to go on but was reluctant to say more.

Wu Xingxue stared back. "Then what?"

The innkeeper swallowed and closed his eyes as if accepting his fate. “The cultivators searched the entire Mount Blossomfell Bazaar and still couldn’t find that guest. He’d vanished into thin air just like that. He was never seen again.”

Chapter 38:
Longing

IT WAS SAD TO SAY, but in that day and age, a missing person was hardly earth-shattering. People died every day, and not many died knowing why. The cultivators were unable to find the man or determine how he went missing. The only possible explanation was that some well-disguised fiend had quietly eaten the missing man. The mission thus changed from "find the missing person" to "find the hidden fiend," a search that led to a bloodcurdling conclusion. Each time the innkeeper recalled it, his hair stood on end.

"Have you…have you ever seen the fiend-seekers the cultivators use?" the innkeeper asked in a parched, hoarse voice. "They're talismans—you burn them, then toss the ashes in the wind. If a fiend is present, the ashes gather around it. Well, I stared wide-eyed that day as the ashes floated out of my window. The cultivators followed those ashes all over the bazaar. They didn't want to cause a panic, so they pretended they were on a routine patrol or casually strolling the market. But in the end, they wound up back at my inn."

At the time, the group had exchanged helpless glances and assumed there were so many people in Mount Blossomfell Bazaar that their vital energy was enough to cover up any fiendish traces, rendering the fiend-seeker ineffective. However, when they began to collect the ashes, they suddenly spiraled in the air and gathered around one person: the missing man's young daughter.

She was so young that the porter couldn't bear to watch her cry. He'd bought a bunch of trinkets from the bazaar to cheer her up and had left her a bowl of sweet red-date soup warming on the hearth. The little girl was still in the front room of the inn, drinking sweet soup by the spoonful. As the ashes gathered around her, she raised her eyes, looked at the group, and licked the corner of her mouth.

At first, everyone fell into a dead silence. It was absurd to consider that this little girl had swallowed her own father. How could that be possible? The cultivators consulted another talisman—a soul-seeker. They'd used soul-seekers in every corner of the bazaar to search for the missing man without luck. This time, they watched the ashes of the soul-seeker flutter through the air and land at the little girl's feet. Unless the soul-seeker was somehow mistaken, the child carried the last lingering scent of the missing man's soul. Everyone went as quiet as winter cicadas.

The cultivators took the little girl away, and eventually, dust settled over the incident. The innkeeper and porter were quite frightened; each took to bed ill for many days afterward. Once they recovered, everything seemed to return to normal, and they gradually put the matter out of their minds.

But not long after the bazaar reopened a year later, there was yet another incident at the inn. On that day, a man in scholar's garb and his study attendant visited the inn and rented a room. The scholar seemed mild-mannered and respectful, and he got along well with his attendant.

The next day, the attendant was gone.

The ensuing events unfolded just as they had a year earlier. The innkeeper felt as though his nightmares had returned. The scholar seemed beside himself with worry, but the innkeeper watched him, knowing a fiend

with a full and satisfied belly sat licking its lips within that husk. He once again sent for the cultivators and watched as they used the fiend-seeker, then the soul-seeker. Sure enough, both talismans pointed to the scholar.

When the talisman identified the scholar, the shock and horror on his face exceeded anyone else's. He slapped at the ashes clinging to his body, yelling, "It wasn't me! It can't be me!" In his terror, he lost all composure and fell into a heap on the floor. As the innkeeper watched, a terrifying idea occurred to him: What if this scholar wasn't a well-hidden fiend but someone truly unaware of his actions? What if something had lured him to kill in his sleep? What if the only reason this had happened at all was because there was something wrong with the inn?

He recalled the cultivator's warnings that this "blessed" place was actually cursed and prone to sinister events. The thought sent a shiver down his spine. The very ground beneath his feet seemed suffused with indescribable horror. Thus far, only guests were involved, and two incidents in two years were not that many. But what might happen in the future? Would he and the porter fall prey to the same curse?

For a time, frequent nightmares plagued the innkeeper. In one version, the porter ate him; in the other, he ate the porter. Either way, the dreams frightened him so much he could barely sleep at night. Eventually, he stopped being obstinate and asked the cultivation clan for help.

"They agreed to help readily enough and sent many experienced people. They pretended to be guests and spent day after day watching my little inn," said the innkeeper, looking absolutely miserable. "But the heavens seemed set on toying with me. Once the cultivators were here, there were no more disturbances—nothing at all. Everything was quiet and uneventful.

Cultivators are busy people, and they need to cultivate on top of that, so it's not like they can spend all their time at my inn. Instead, they figured out a way to do both." The innkeeper pointed at the cadaver on the floor. "That was their solution."

It was the very first time the innkeeper learned that even cultivation clans resorted to dubious methods like necromancy. As the cultivator explained it, "We would never resort to this if we weren't desperate. You probably don't know this, but when it comes to fiends, these cadavers have sharper senses than we do. They're far better at sniffing out fiends than any talisman. If another fiend sneaks into your inn, it'll know for sure—and if what happened before happens again, it can try to stop it."

These words did not allay the innkeeper's worries. "It can *try* to stop it? What if it can't, then what?!"

"There is a sigil on its body," the cultivator replied. "Once triggered, we'll know it even from a thousand miles away. As soon as that happens, we'll rush right over. Whatever it is, fiend or catastrophe, its presence will be at its peak and far easier to find. We'll see then which part of your inn is cursed and determine how it came to be in the first place."

The cultivator repeatedly assured the innkeeper that the cultivation clan took special care in preparing the cadaver, that it was different than the undead controlled by necromancers. The innkeeper still had some reservations, but as instructed, he locked the cadaver inside its coffin and covered the lid with numerous sealing talismans. He then placed the coffin in the attic. Fearing that the cadaver would break out and cause havoc, he tasked the porter with replacing the talismans at intervals to ensure the seal remained intact.

Two years passed without any further catastrophes befalling the inn, and the cadaver remained within its coffin. Once a wound has healed, people often forget the pain, and thus the innkeeper came to believe that the inn's accursed ground had been a temporary condition. Good and bad fortune were cyclical like anything else, and it was about time for his luck to change. Sure, the porter often smelled like a corpse, and the innkeeper had giant bags beneath his eyes, but at least they could sleep through the night again.

Those in the know did not breathe a word about the two incidents, and the tale never circulated as gossip through Mount Blossomfell Bazaar. Still, business at the inn was never quite the same; it grew less frequented by the day until there were seldom any guests at all. The innkeeper and porter had also grown superstitious. They welcomed those traveling alone, but when two traveling companions arrived together, they treated them with trepidation, afraid they'd once more wake up to find themselves short a guest.

The innkeeper shot Wu Xingxue an anxious glance, then darted his eyes away. "When you wanted to stay at the inn the day before last, I was frightened. I was truly terrified! I couldn't sleep all night, and I didn't dare open my eyes either. I was so scared something bad was going to happen again."

One thing the innkeeper dared not add was that he'd kept his ears pricked for any noises coming from the guest room. The night passed uneventfully, and he didn't hear a single sound—no conversation, no footsteps, nothing. He suspected the guests had placed restrictive wards or seals. Early the next day, he waited behind the counter and hoped that both guests would emerge from the room.

“When I saw the two of you come downstairs safe and sound, I was so relieved.” The innkeeper let out a long sigh. “So why did you have to come back? If you hadn’t stayed a second night, maybe you wouldn’t have—”

He stopped himself sharply mid-sentence and looked up in fear. He was so weighed down with his own concerns that he’d almost said something he shouldn’t have.

Wu Xingxue’s dark and fathomless eyes bored into him. “Maybe I wouldn’t have what?”

The innkeeper swallowed. Had he been a hundred times more courageous, he still wouldn’t have dared to continue. But whether or not he held his tongue, Wu Xingxue knew what he’d been about to say. Under the influence of this accursed land, a little girl ate her father and a scholar ate his own study attendant. Now it was Wu Xingxue’s turn to wake alone. The innkeeper assumed history had repeated itself, and Wu Xingxue had consumed his friend in the night.

It was so absurd Wu Xingxue nearly laughed out loud. *How is that possible? It’s not like I’ve gone crazy,* he thought. Dread rapidly overtook the absurdity—he *was* a fiend, and fiends lacked restraint. Take Sang Yu, for example; one minute he was borrowing a person’s vital energy for comfort and warmth, the next he was drinking that person dry. Even former celestials like Yunhai could lose control and behave recklessly.

What about me? wondered Wu Xingxue. *Have I ever lost control? Have I ever done something like this before? And if so…has Xiao Fuxuan witnessed it?*

He did not believe that someone like the Tianxiu Immortal could vanish because of some insignificant cursed inn. The rumors and strange

phenomena didn't scare him. He had simply been overcome with an intense longing to see Xiao Fuxuan.

As the thought flashed through his mind, percussive footsteps echoed from beyond the door. A handful of paper ashes flew into the room through the open window and gathered at Wu Xingxue's side. The infernal energy was so strong, the ashes pulsed and sparked. A group of people dressed in disciple robes of the same color ran after the ashes. Their high ponytails trailed long, fluttering ribbons, and they each carried a sword with a silver hilt bearing a red round seal that read: *Feng*. This was the Feng Clan, the very cultivators who were often summoned to the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar.

Their leader, a young woman with an intelligent air, called back to her companions. "Don't worry, the cadaver's been stable and immobile for quite a while. It probably had that fiend under control ages ago—"

Her words cut off as soon as she stepped through the door and saw the "stable and immobile" cadaver on the floor beneath the very much not "under control" fiend who was wielding the corpse's own sword.

The fiend greeted them in a voice as warm as a spring breeze. "I must ask all of you to help me find someone, even if it means overturning the soil three feet down. Otherwise, none of you will be leaving."

The more they dwelled on his words, the more terrified they became.

Chapter 39:
Arbor Divinus

THE PEOPLE FROM THE FENG CLAN never imagined hearing such a statement. There had been constant turmoil in the world in recent years. The Mount Blossomfell Bazaar's ongoing prosperity amid the chaos was due to the Feng Clan's protection, and the people of Blossomfell always treated them with great respect. Fiends gave them wide berth, and those who got close enough to see the *Feng* emblazoned on their swords started a fight or fled. They had never laid eyes on a fiend like the one standing before them. He was unmoved by the *Feng* on their swords and called not for their blood but their help.

For a moment, the young woman leading the group thought she'd misheard. She froze, too tongue-tied to respond, then glared at him through her almond-shaped eyes. "What fetid hellhole did you crawl out of, you arrogant…*man*!"

She could have used plenty of harsher terms, but the fiend carried himself with such nobility she felt a bizarre sense of restraint—though not enough to contain her sword. With the fiend's threat still hanging in the air, all eight Feng disciples drew their long swords in unison.

Clang! Clang!

As the song of clashing metal rang through the air, each long sword's aura drew to a sharp point and charged toward Wu Xingxue.

In an instant, his silhouette seemed to flicker. Their sword auras pierced only the fiend's image and ran straight through to the bed behind him.

The wooden pillars splintered, sending shards of wood flying in every direction. The panicked innkeeper shot up from where he'd been beside the table and lurched toward the Feng disciples for protection. He reached them just as all four posts of the once-sturdy bed rumbled and collapsed to the floor in a pile of shattered wood.

Dread overwhelmed the Feng clan fighters. "Where did he go?!" they blurted out, not expecting a reply.

"Are you looking for me?" a voice behind them queried politely.

The disciples stiffened and whipped around to find the fiend behind one hapless disciple, gripping his wrist and forcing him to hold his blade against his own neck. The disciple's face was strained, pale, and on the verge of turning blue. The veins along the back of his hand bulged as he fruitlessly tried to free himself from the fiend's grip. He gritted his teeth so hard they nearly shattered.

"Why, you…" he started.

The fiend spoke deliberately, his tone airy. "Someone advised me not to cause too much commotion, and this was my only option. Normally, I'd subdue your leader, but holding a lady like this might appear lecherous. I settled for this gentleman as my best option."

The disciples were stunned into silence. The fiend spoke with such courtesy, but what he clearly meant was: *I'm capable of grabbing every last one of you. I have my pick.* It made their blood boil, and the expressions of several disciples darkened as they prepared to raise their swords once more. When Wu Xingxue increased the pressure on the blade against his throat, the restrained disciple gave a muffled grunt.

"Nobody move!" the young woman shouted.

The disciples tightened their grips on their sword hilts but didn't dare do anything. Wu Xingxue relaxed his grip in kind, and the disciple's sword lifted slightly from his neck. The innkeeper looked around indecisively for a moment before he shuffled back to the table.

Eying the sword's edge, the young woman spoke again. "When we came in earlier, you said you were looking for someone."

"Correct."

The young woman's delicate brows drew together as she frowned deeply, and she stared at Wu Xingxue in confusion. "What is going on here? We expected the same situation as before."

"It *is* the same," the innkeeper said, his expression pained.

The young woman cast another look at Wu Xingxue as she replied to the innkeeper. "Then why bother looking for the missing person? Presumably, he's missing because—"

"Don't say it!" the innkeeper interrupted, his hands waving chaotically. "Esteemed cultivators, please! He's asking you to look, so please just look."

Refusing to admit defeat, the young woman glared at Wu Xingxue. "If you're so capable, and you can restrain whomever you want whenever you want, there's nothing any of us could do to stop you…" She paused, a challenging glint in her eye as she considered the flaw in his logic. "Why would you need to ask us for help? Surely someone so powerful could handle one missing person on his own. Let's see. Could it be that you're restricted in some way? Are you wounded? Or are you an arrow at the end of its arc now that you've used the last of your strength just to scare us?"

She and her fellow disciples frequently encountered fiends with plenty of bark and very little bite, and the longer she spoke, the more certain she became that Wu Xingxue was one of them. The disciples tightened their grips on their swords once more, searching for an opening.

"Not quite," Wu Xingxue replied, his deep, dark eyes leveled at them. "The problem is that I only know how to slaughter. I don't know how to do anything else."

For a moment, no one made a sound. Wu Xingxue spoke the truth, but to the disciples, it sounded like another threat. Still, his clear and concise words paired with his calm gaze suggested he was not bluffing. The innkeeper tried to signal the Feng Clan with his eyes, but they remained at an impasse. Just as the first hint of irritation creased Wu Xingxue's forehead, the young woman broke the silence.

"Fine, we'll look for him," she said. She pulled out several paper talismans emblazoned with the Feng seal and nicked her finger with her blade, not bothering to ask the innkeeper for an ink brush. With a bead of blood poised on her finger, she asked, "What's the name of the person you're looking for?"

The innkeeper had asked the pair to sign his guest register when they arrived. He recalled the names the guests had given him and was about to reply when Wu Xingxue answered instead.

"Xiao Fuxuan."

The innkeeper snapped his mouth shut in bewilderment while each Feng disciple's jaw dropped. Silence once more filled the inn.

After a short pause, the innkeeper squeaked, "Huh? But that wasn't the name you used when you came in…and doesn't that name…isn't that the

name of the Tianxiu Immortal?"

Surprise slowly registered on his face, which made sense; anyone would be shocked to learn they'd been hosting the Tianxiu Immortal for the past two days. A moment later, another emotion overtook his surprise before vanishing so quickly it nearly went unnoticed.

But Wu Xingxue saw it. For a moment, the innkeeper's face had radiated…joy? Or something approximating it, like a flicker of sunlight briefly shining through a dusty bead of colored glass. The look in the innkeeper's eyes was somehow familiar. It reminded Wu Xingxue of the way Yi Wusheng had looked at him back at the Hua estate, when the man had clung to the hems of his robes and begged, *"Help me."*

Could a fiend have also overtaken the innkeeper so thoroughly that he could only reveal his soul for an instant when he heard the words "Tianxiu Immortal"? No—he did not appear to be possessed, and besides, there wasn't a hint of infernal energy on his person.

Then what could it be? wondered Wu Xingxue.

As he recalled the innkeeper's tale, a subtle problem in its telling jumped out: The innkeeper claimed that, after the scholar and his study attendant met with misfortune, he thought of the cultivator's admonition and agreed that his inn seemed tainted. It plagued him with nightmares and kept him from sleeping until he sought assistance from the Feng Clan. The story was innocuous enough but for one odd detail; if the innkeeper couldn't dine in peace or rest day and night, why not relocate the inn? Wouldn't moving be easier and less frightening than keeping a cadaver imprisoned in a coffin in his attic, knowing it might escape or lose control? Why take the risk? Was it

that he didn't want to relocate—or that he couldn't? Could he not bring himself to leave this place, or was something preventing him from leaving?

Wu Xingxue narrowed his eyes.

The innkeeper felt a chill sweep across the back of his neck just before a blade sharp enough to split hairs pressed against his throat. Wu Xingxue, who'd been holding a Feng disciple hostage just moments ago, was behind the innkeeper. He'd moved as briskly as a ghost.

"You're afraid of this place, yet you won't leave," Wu Xingxue said in a near whisper. "Are you guarding something?"

His question was like a small cut along the side of a sealed purse. The innkeeper's eyes brightened again, and a tremor went through his body as though he was waking from a long dream. His eyelids trembling, he opened his mouth and tried with all his might to say something. Then, he pursed his lips and gave a labored shake of the head. It was as if he wanted to talk, but something prevented him from speaking and even forced him to express the opposite of what he wished to say.

This peculiar reaction verified Wu Xingxue's hypothesis. When the innkeeper rambled on and on earlier, Wu Xingxue had assumed he was naturally loquacious. He could have related the story of the little girl eating her father and the young master eating his study attendant in just a few sentences, but for some reason, he'd started with the jadehaem growing in his backyard. Perhaps he'd wanted to give Wu Xingxue as much information as he could within the confines of what he was permitted to say in an attempt to convey a subtle layer of additional meaning: *This is no ordinary place, and I cannot leave.*

"Are you guarding a thing or a place? Who asked you to guard it?" *And is Xiao Fuxuan there?*

Again, the innkeeper struggled to open his mouth. He must have prattled off the same story many times over the years, but his listeners had grown wary and never looked any deeper. Now that he had someone to ask him this question, he had to say one thing more, no matter what.

In a voice hardly more than a rasp, the innkeeper haltingly asked Wu Xingxue a question: "Do you know why…they call this place…Blossomfell Terrace?"

"Do you know why they call that place Blossomfell Terrace?"

Wu Xingxue faltered as he recalled those words.

It had been one of the long nights in Urbs Caelestia. Wu Xingxue had still been Rex Spiritus.

Having finished his work, he returned to the Seat of Spring Breeze, sent his two chirping pageboys away, and leaped onto the high eaves of his jade pavilion with a jug of quality ambrosia in tow. White mist hung on the eaves, and he perched there as if amid the clouds.

Three cups of wine later, he was overcome with drowsiness. He pulled the mask he often wore over his face and lay back with his hands folded behind his head. Before long, he felt the jade eaves vibrate as though someone else had climbed up. Footsteps approached from the other end of the roof until they stopped next to him. Someone lifted his mask just enough to reveal his chin.

Xiao Fuxuan's voice rang out in the night. "You drank my wine."

Wu Xingxue was too lazy to move. The mask still hid the top half of his face, and without bothering to open his eyes, he replied in a soft drawl, “You’re being unreasonable. I have three jugs of ambrosia. Two are mine, and only one is yours. How do you know which one I was drinking?”

“I can tell from the way it smells.”

The night breeze tickled Wu Xingxue’s ear. He pried open one eye, then pushed himself into a seated position. His mask was getting on his nerves, so he removed it and picked up the wine jug to offer it to the man beside him. “Here, have it back.”

“Next time, give me back a full jug.” Xiao Fuxuan did not take it.

Wu Xingxue looked at him askance, then knocked on the jade eaves with a knuckle. Two pageboys came scurrying out.

“What do you need, my lord?” they called from beneath the eaves.

“Bring me another jug of ambrosia,” replied Wu Xingxue. “Tianxiu demands I return one to him.”

With their hands clasped before them and tucked into the folds of their wide sleeves, the two pageboys turned in unison to look at Xiao Fuxuan. “Mighty Tianxiu, why so miserly?”

They were full graduates of their master’s teachings. Wu Xingxue held his knees and laughed.

Xiao Fuxuan lowered his eyes to look at the two little ones. “If I’m any more generous, my Southsill Overlook wine cellar will soon be empty,” he answered mildly.

The chastened pageboys had nothing to say for themselves and ran off. Wu Xingxue insisted on pouring three cups of wine for Xiao Fuxuan. After

all, even if the jug was half-empty, he'd still returned it. As Xiao Fuxuan tossed back the third cup, Wu Xingxue pointed at a spot of wilderness in the mortal world beneath Urbs Caelestia.

"The lanterns are lit in Blossomfell Terrace. Is today the third day of the Third Month?"

"You mean in the mortal world?" asked Xiao Fuxuan.

"Mm, right. It must be. The bazaar lights the lanterns and opens on the third of the Third every year. It's quite lively. I drop by from time to time."

Xiao Fuxuan looked toward the faint lantern light. He had *some* impression of the area; he'd once wandered into those mountains by chance, but it'd been the wrong season, and he'd missed the bazaar.

Wu Xingxue watched the lights flicker for a while.

"Do you know why they call that place Blossomfell Terrace?"

Xiao Fuxuan regarded him. "Why?"

"A long, long time ago, the Arbor Divinus grew there. It was there before the Spirit Terrace even existed. Jadehaem sprouted from the earth where it grew, and petals fell like rain for four miles around, hence the name: Blossomfell Terrace. Even now, there are remnants of jadehaem there."

Many gods had heard of the Arbor Divinus, but most knew very little about it. Rumor had it that the Arbor Divinus could resurrect the dead, though other rumors disagreed. The one constant was that after the Spirit Terrace came to be, the Arbor Divinus was no more—almost as if it had never existed. Ever since, mortals had wondered why a place without flowering trees and known only for its seasonal bazaar was named Blossomfell Terrace.

"How do you know where its name comes from?" Xiao Fuxuan asked.

“It’s where I came into the world, in the very beginning.”

Thanks to the innkeeper’s question, Wu Xingxue had pieced together his once-forgotten conversation about Blossomfell Terrace. Connecting that recollection to the freshly sprouted jadehaem in the inn’s back courtyard, he abruptly understood both what the innkeeper was guarding and precisely where Xiao Fuxuan was.

Perhaps the Arbor Divinus wasn’t truly gone; perhaps the Heavenly Principles of Spirit Terrace had merely sealed it in a forbidden domain for some reason. Wu Xingxue didn’t know how Xiao Fuxuan could have been pulled inside that area, but he knew he must find the entrance if he wanted to follow.

Wu Xingxue snapped his gaze upward. “Where is the crevice in the stone where the jade branch sprouted?” he asked the innkeeper. Since jadehaem only grew in the presence of the Arbor Divinus, the new jade branch could point him toward the entrance.

“In the courtyard,” the innkeeper responded flatly.

The inn’s courtyard was built against the mountain and consisted of three terraces that formed a semicircle around the inn. The first terrace featured wells and trellises and was covered in stone cairns. On the second terrace, fruiting peach and orange trees grew over yet more stone cairns. The entire courtyard was filled with stones and flat rocks—there were crevices everywhere. To keep it hidden, the entrance to the forbidden area had to be small. Wu Xingxue needed to pinpoint the exact location.

He inspected the courtyard from where he stood. “Which crevice?”

The innkeeper pointed to the left. Wu Xingxue followed the motion of his finger, then turned on his heel and walked confidently in the opposite

direction. The innkeeper kept quiet. The area was meant to be a secret, and since the innkeeper was restricted from guiding Wu Xingxue, whichever direction he pointed had to be a lie—one that led the archfiend as far from the true location as possible.

Wu Xingxue walked a short distance and asked the innkeeper again. This time, the innkeeper paused for a moment, then pointed to the southeast, assuming Wu Xingxue would walk northwest. He was dumbstruck when Wu Xingxue instead took him at his word and strode in the direction he was pointing. After several more rounds of pointing, the innkeeper was completely turned around, while Wu Xingxue seemed to know exactly where he was going. He stopped beside an inconspicuous pile of stones.

This cairn, a haphazard pile of weather-worn stone slabs fallen from the surrounding walls, stood untended in a desolate corner of the courtyard. Beneath its thick moss, the small opening was nearly undetectable. Wu Xingxue ran his hand over that bit of broken wall before he turned to the Feng disciples.

“Could you create an opening here while keeping the commotion to a minimum?”

The Feng disciples glanced at one another uncertainly. They were still trying to wrap their heads around the fact that the missing person was the Tianxiu Immortal.

Their young leader was particularly preoccupied; it took her a moment to understand Wu Xingxue’s question. She still held several soul-seekers in her hand, but they’d become superfluous before she had a chance to write the name *Xiao Fuxuan*.

“We can try,” she finally replied. “But what if we can’t make an opening?”

“Well, I’ll just have to make as much commotion as possible,” Wu Xingxue said. Disrupting the illusion enough to shatter it would reveal which of its elements were most stable, and those elements likely warranted the closest scrutiny. The more Wu Xingxue considered it, the more feasible it seemed.

He was about to begin his assault on the illusion when thick clouds covered the majestic night sky over the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar. Thunder roared, lightning flashed, and the crumbling courtyard wall trembled like the teeth of someone stuck in the cold. Wu Xingxue’s fingers, pale as winter’s ice, curled into claws as he gathered his vital force. Just as he was about to release it like a raging tide, a hand reached from the fog to clasp his hand.

“Xiao Fuxuan?” he said, bewildered. His tense fingers relaxed. The thick fog rushed toward him, and the clasping hand pulled him forward into the forbidden domain.

Chapter 40:
Faces

As he traveled, Wu Xingxue tried to speak but found himself choking on the smoke and soot that filled the air. A violent coughing fit overcame him, his neck and face turning purple as he gasped for breath. Someone stepped protectively in front of him, blocking him from the acrid air until his coughing eased and he regained his composure.

Wu Xingxue looked up. It really was Xiao Fuxuan. The smell of smoke clung to him as well, and the wind whipped a blast of the domain's suffocating scent from his robes, but Wu Xingxue kept this to himself. He squinted a little and suppressed the urge to cough until his eyes reddened and burned from the effort.

"It's windy and smoky here, and the killing aura is too strong. You shouldn't have—" Xiao Fuxuan had been looking away, but as he turned back around, he broke off mid-sentence.

"What's wrong?" Wu Xingxue asked.

Xiao Fuxuan averted his gaze then fell silent for a beat. "It's nothing."

"I shouldn't have what?"

"It's nothing," Xiao Fuxuan repeated.

Assuming the Tianxiu Immortal wanted to say something like *You shouldn't have come*, Wu Xingxue could not resist offering an excuse. "It's not like I wanted to barge in here without a plan. You weren't at the inn to see it, but the innkeeper had a pretty unusual way of welcoming his guests."

“What do you mean?”

Wu Xingxue thought back as he began his modified version of the events. “In the middle of the night, he took a cadaver that’d been dead for who knows how long and posed it right next to my bed. I woke in the dark, and its dead eyes were the first thing I saw when I rolled over. I was so terrified, my soul nearly left my body!”

A complicated expression arose on Xiao Fuxuan’s face. His closed lips twitched and reluctantly parted again under Wu Xingxue’s expectant gaze. “And then?” he prompted.

Satisfied, Wu Xingxue continued, “And then there was a minor conflict, which brought the Feng Clan rushing over. As soon as they arrived, they tossed a handful of paper ashes at me. They claimed it was a fiend-seeker talisman! I mean, what sort of ridiculous nonsense is that?! It got all over me—” He stopped grumbling for a moment to lower his head and flick a few ashes from the fabric of his robes. He dabbed his fingertip into the ashes and lifted it to Xiao Fuxuan. “Look.”

Xiao Fuxuan stared at Wu Xingxue’s fingertip, then hummed in acknowledgement. Wu Xingxue didn’t have a single scratch on him, so he clearly hadn’t suffered any injury from this ordeal. As obvious as that was, Xiao Fuxuan couldn’t admit it while looking into those expectant eyes.

“Did they talk with their fists?” he asked, acquiescing in his way.

“They tried to talk with their *swords*.”

Xiao Fuxuan said nothing, and even the archfiend realized he was laying it on a bit thick, so he changed tack.

“Good thing they didn’t make too much of a commotion! After they listened to my explanation, they stopped calling for my death and offered to help me look for you instead.”

Xiao Fuxuan’s gaze flickered as he considered the story thus far. “How long were you looking for me?”

Maybe it was because of the forbidden domain’s scalding, smoke-filled winds, but Xiao Fuxuan’s voice didn’t seem as cold as usual. In fact, it sounded almost tender. Wu Xingxue was startled by the fluttering in his chest. The impulsive longing he’d suppressed earlier resurfaced with no rhyme or reason, even though the person he’d searched for all night was right in front of him.

Wu Xingxue hummed a quiet note as he pondered the feeling.

“It wasn’t all that long, really,” he said after he’d collected himself. “It’s just that the entrance was hidden quite well. The innkeeper’s mouth seems to have been sealed, so he talked all day and still didn’t share anything useful. The Feng Clan disciples weren’t that capable either. When I asked them to make an opening here, they dragged their feet for no reason…”

Wu Xingxue looked up and realized Xiao Fuxuan had been watching him closely the whole time. His words caught in his throat.

Xiao Fuxuan raised a hand and softly touched his crooked finger to the corner of Wu Xingxue’s eye. Wu Xingxue’s breath caught in his throat. He was approaching his tribulation, so he was as cold as an ice sculpture. The heat radiating from Xiao Fuxuan’s finger was so vivid that it lingered where he’d touched. The sensation was familiar, arousing other fragmented memories in Wu Xingxue. The closer he got to Blossomfell Terrace, the more he thought of the past.

A blurry recollection flashed through his mind:

There was Xiao Fuxuan's name, Mian*, emblazoned on his neck. It began to glow from the bottom up like an expanse of golden flame. As Wu Xingxue squinted against the brightness, he felt someone dab the outer corner of his eye.*

Xiao Fuxuan rubbed the glistening knuckle of his finger and murmured, "It's wet."

In the present, Wu Xingxue's eyelashes trembled. He subconsciously reached up and pressed his fingers into the residual warmth of Xiao Fuxuan's finger. He fell even more quiet then, like an ermine with its fur coat smoothed down.

He shook off the feeling.

"Was that because some of the Feng Clan's paper ashes got in my eye?"

"Hmm?" Xiao Fuxuan intoned. A moment later: "No."

Wu Xingxue stared at him. *No? Then why did you…*

Another stretch of time passed before Xiao Fuxuan's deep, warm voice cut through the smoke and wind. "The glamour faded there, so I altered it."

Wu Xingxue's gaze wavered. The smoke-laden winds behind Xiao Fuxuan scattered just enough to give Wu Xingxue a glimpse of a hundred surrounding miles of scorched earth. His expression soured. "Why is everything here burnt?"

Xiao Fuxuan turned and looked over the area, away from Wu Xingxue.

"No idea. It was like this when I arrived."

The heavy, acrid scent of burning confounded Wu Xingxue. “Is that so?” he mumbled.

“Yes.” Xiao Fuxuan was still not looking at him.

Wu Xingxue did not question it further. “How did you actually end up here?”

“At midnight, I heard a voice.”

“Whose voice?”

“It was…yours.”

“You heard *my* voice?” That was Xiao Fuxuan’s most confounding answer yet. “Where did it come from and what did it say?”

“It came from out in the courtyard. It called my name.”

It had been the dead of night, so although the voice had been faint, it’d been crystal clear—there was no way Xiao Fuxuan could have been mistaken. At first, he thought Wu Xingxue had gotten cold and called out for him, so he’d bent down to check his temperature. That was when he heard the voice again and decided it was the idol in the bag hanging from his belt. Only after he heard the voice a third time did he figure out that it was coming from the courtyard.

Had it been any other time, with the real Wu Xingxue lying on the bed in front of him, the sound of Wu Xingxue’s voice from outside could not have diverted Xiao Fuxuan’s attention. He would have simply used his sword to sweep the voice aside. But because they were in an illusion of Mount Blossomfell Bazaar, he’d hesitated. The bazaar contained the present Wu Xingxue, and perhaps it contained the past Wu Xingxue as well. Until Xiao Fuxuan was certain, he could not recklessly draw his sword.

He'd approached the window, cracked it open slightly, and looked in the direction of the voice. There was no light that way and no sign of anyone. The area where the voice seemed to have come from was fairly close, so instead of sending his spiritual core from his body, Xiao Fuxuan sent a curl of spiritual consciousness from his fingertip to check the courtyard.

The voice had echoed from a corner of the courtyard near the wall, and as soon as his spirit touched it, he felt a preternatural gale manifest from the ground. It enveloped his entire being in an instant. By the time he cleaved through the gale with a single blow, he was inside the forbidden domain.

"This is so strange," Wu Xingxue said. "There were two of us in the room, so why did it only pull you in? Does this domain prefer some to others?"

And if it does, shouldn't it prefer me?

This was where Wu Xingxue had come into the world, so his roots here had to be deeper than Xiao Fuxuan's. Try as he might, Wu Xingxue could think of only one explanation: The forbidden domain did not pull in Xiao Fuxuan of its own accord; someone who wanted to lure Xiao Fuxuan must have manipulated the area to do so. If true, that raised some interesting questions. How many people were capable of ensnaring the Tianxiu Immortal?

As Wu Xingxue mulled it over, Xiao Fuxuan said, "Earlier, you said that this is a forbidden domain. Did you hear something?"

Wu Xingxue was caught off guard. *You didn't know?*

Then, he remembered that Xiao Fuxuan hadn't heard the innkeeper's story firsthand. As for Rex Spiritus's revelation in the Seat of Spring Breeze that the Arbor Divinus had once grown in Blossomfell Terrace, that

conversation had occurred hundreds of years in the past. It was unlikely Xiao Fuxuan still remembered, and even if he did, it was unlikely he'd tie that information to this place. Wu Xingxue stared into the distance but couldn't see even a single branch in the wide expanse of scorched earth. If he hadn't recalled that night at the Seat of Spring Breeze, he would never have guessed the Arbor Divinus might have been sealed away in this place.

Speaking of which, he saw no wards or restrictions sealing the area. Aside from the strangling smoke, this patch of scorched earth was almost tranquil.

"Was it lifeless like this when you came in?" Wu Xingxue asked.

"Mm-hmm."

"Did you rouse an arcane formation or anything like that?"

"No."

Well, that's odd, thought Wu Xingxue. He grew more bewildered when he remembered Xiao Fuxuan's warning about the strong killing aura in the area. "Where's that aura you mentioned?"

Xiao Fuxuan faltered, though he sounded levelheaded when he did speak. "I was just trying to scare you."

Wu Xingxue cocked his head.

"Since you're already here…" Xiao Fuxuan seemed a bit troubled. "There's nothing more to say."

Through the smoke, Wu Xingxue could make out a vague shadow in the distance. He squinted at it and patted Xiao Fuxuan's arm. "Is that…a house over that way?"

"It's probably a shrine. I was just about to take a look."

“So what happened?”

Xiao Fuxuan paused. “Before I could go, I heard someone outside say that he’d make a huge commotion if an opening couldn’t be made.”

Wu Xingxue didn’t know what else to say. After a moment, he raised his hand and pushed Xiao Fuxuan forward a step. “Fine, then. Let’s go, let’s go. I won’t talk anymore.”

They crossed the desolate, ashen wasteland toward the dark shadow. Xiao Fuxuan was correct: It *was* a shrine, strange and lonesome in the barren landscape. Its blackwood facade covered a floor and altar of white jade. The small sculpture enshrined on the altar, also made of white jade, differed from typical idols. It depicted not a dignified or reserved figure lamenting human suffering but a young man leaning against a towering jade tree. The sculpture had no face, so there was no way to identify the young man other than his tall, slender figure. Behind the sculpture stood a stone tablet carved with an inscription, the first line of which should have been the young man’s full name. Oddly, it read only *General Bai*.

Wanting a closer look, Wu Xingxue reached for the jade tablet. Suddenly, he heard a soft, eerie voice.

“You mustn’t touch it. You’ll die…” the voice said.

Wu Xingxue’s hand paused in the air. The voice had emanated from nowhere. He darted his eyes around but couldn’t find a source. Xiao Fuxuan flicked the altar’s cloth covering open with his sword, but aside from an enormous vat full of incense ashes, there was nothing there. After a moment’s reflection, Wu Xingxue’s brow furrowed as he realized something strange: The voice hadn’t come from *around* him—it had come from above.

He looked up.

Faces peered down at him from high overhead. The entire ceiling was covered by bodies that hung like bats from the rafters, their feet pointing up as their heads dangled over the altar below. Wu Xingxue stared in silence until he decided it was time to tug on the Tianxiu Immortal's sleeve. There were far too many faces—old and young, men and women—and every last one was bone white. The ropes from which they hung squeaked rhythmically as they swayed like reeds in the wind. It was hard to tell which face could have uttered the warning.

Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan stared upward together, each with a trench of their own between their brows. As Wu Xingxue searched for the speaker, the voice echoed again.

"This forbidden domain was sealed with layer upon layer of arcane formations, blades and fire, and eighty-one volleys of lightning from the Ninth Heaven. To think you could break through all of them so quickly…"

Wu Xingxue was caught off guard. “Arcane formations? Blades, fire, lightning from the Ninth Heaven? Where?”

“He destroyed all of them. We were watching.”

It took Wu Xingxue a moment to understand who “he” was. He opened his mouth and turned to Xiao Fuxuan. “Didn’t you *just* tell me that this area was lifeless when you came in?”

Xiao Fuxuan exercised his right to remain silent.

“You said there wasn’t even one arcane formation here,” Wu Xingxue recalled aloud. “You said you didn’t see anything. You even said the killing aura thing wasn’t true.”

A chorus of mocking laughter rang out overhead. The mouths on the suspended faces cracked open one by one, and their voices were light as drifting catkins.

“He lied.”

“All lies.”

“He fooled you.”

They had indeed been lies. As soon as Xiao Fuxuan had entered the realm, he’d faced trial after trial. Sharp blades and seas of flames had borne down on him with such ferocity that the very air struggled to break through, making it difficult to breathe. Anyone weaker would have needed an army of people to help disengage the traps and survive. The ordeal was so taxing Xiao Fuxuan lacked the attention required to split off his consciousness and send a message back to Wu Xingxue. Only after breaking most of the formations was he able to catch a few vague voices from beyond the forbidden domain.

Xiao Fuxuan had just been blocking the last few strikes of lightning when he heard Wu Xingxue talking to the Feng Clan. His long blade cut through a swell of flame, then relentlessly swept away a wave of sword auras stretching across the horizon. The scattered crimson flames burned over a ten-mile area. He waited until the last spark of flame died out to ensure that the cursed land was reduced to ashes. Only after he was certain there were no lingering traces of a killing formation did he flick the dust from his sword and shift across the distance back to the entrance of the forbidden domain in a single step.

He hadn't had time to tour the entire area or investigate the barely discernible shrine in the distance, let alone determine what this place was meant to seal. He only had time to wipe a few flakes of ash from his jaw, return his sword to its scabbard, and reach out to pull Wu Xingxue to his side.

Chapter 41:
Facade

THE PEOPLE HANGING UPSIDE DOWN from the rafters spoke over one another in a disorderly chorus. The shrine reverberated with their eerie, soft laughter that drew closer before drifting away again as the bodies swayed on the ropes that hung them. Their laughter grew increasingly shrill until it seemed the entire forbidden domain cackled along with them. It went on for quite a while but came to a sudden stop once the Tianxiu Immortal's expression turned ominous. The entire shrine fell into a lifeless standoff.

The situation was deeply disturbing, but Wu Xingxue couldn't help finding it a little funny. He hid his smile when Xiao Fuxuan looked at him.

Rather than speaking to Wu Xingxue, Xiao Fuxuan addressed the people above. "Who are you?"

The figures slowly twisted in his direction, though their ropes still swayed. They'd been hanging for so long that their torsos, necks, and even their faces were stretched. It was impossible to tell how they'd once looked.

"Us?" replied the voices. "Who are we?"

Their words faded into laughter at Xiao Fuxuan's question, but this time, it only lasted for a moment before it stopped. They continued as quietly as if whispering into another's ear.

"We're already dead."

"Nonsense! We're still alive."

"Then we're both. Dead and alive."

One of them, though it wasn't clear which, let out a long and airy sigh, and everyone else sighed along with them, one breath weaving into another like an unsettling tapestry.

Wu Xingxue frowned when it occurred to him that these people differed from the fiends, ghouls, and commoners invoked to the Valley of Laments. Inferior fiends and ghouls could not speak; they stumbled around mindlessly as if insentient and understood only hunger and eating. Superior fiends were indistinguishable from humans and could pass as the real thing, so it was nigh impossible to recognize them without some special ability. The commoners who'd fallen victim to invocation they'd met had spoken normally to evade discovery. Wu Xingxue had never before encountered such creatures and found talking to them quite difficult.

"What are these things?" Wu Xingxue whispered, tugging at Xiao Fuxuan's sleeve.

"I don't know."

"Make something up!"

Xiao Fuxuan paused. The world was full of strange things, each distinct in form and spirit. Even a god could not have seen them all, at least not frequently enough to recognize everything on sight. The Tianxiu Immortal spoke little to begin with and disliked ambiguity. When it came to unfamiliar matters or speculation, he preferred to say *I don't know*. He was famous throughout Urbs Caelestia for this tendency. However, in the presence of Wu Xingxue, he frequently made exceptions.

"The Bound," he said finally.

"Oh? And what is that?" Wu Xingxue's face projected awe as he

awaited Lord Immortal's reply with bated breath.

Xiao Fuxuan capitulated. "The souls of mortals reincarnate. Every time the flesh perishes, the soul enters the next cycle of rebirth, like flowers fading and blooming in an endless cycle. However, the soul and flesh are not always in lockstep. The souls of those who die before fulfilling vows they made in life sometimes linger even though the flesh has perished. These souls remain anchored to their bodies, continuing on as if still alive. They are called 'the Attached.' Others have their souls forcefully removed from their bodies *before* the flesh has perished. Their souls and flesh are bound somehow, unable to find release. These are known as 'the Bound.' From appearance alone, these seem like an example."

Wu Xingxue was unmoved when he heard about the Attached, who chose to remain in pursuit of unfinished business, but his expression cooled when Xiao Fuxuan explained the Bound.

"So their souls are bound," said Wu Xingxue. "What about their bodies?"

"Their bodies stay as they are, undying and ageless, but their souls are unable to leave. They're extremely hard to identify."

"Even for you? Why is that? Because they don't look or smell like corpses?"

Xiao Fuxuan delved into his memory for his rare few encounters with the Bound. "Their bodies never die, but they don't know what has happened to them. Over time, they start to lie to themselves."

"How so?"

"They age repeatedly."

This gave Wu Xingxue pause. “You mean…their bodies go back to infancy, and they grow old all over again?”

“Not necessarily from an infant stage or until old age either. It’s different with everyone.”

Wu Xingxue was unsettled at the thought of these soulless husks, no different than the walking dead, commingling unnoticed with the living. The Bound could pass through all stages of life, their appearances changing with the years, as they conversed and joked with people who never suspected a thing.

“That would make them difficult to identify even to the gods,” observed Wu Xingxue. “Perhaps those closest to them would discover the truth after a few decades.”

Anyone making this discovery would probably die of fright. Finding out one day that the person sharing their bed, their close relative, or just a neighbor they saw and chatted with every day should have died long ago—how many ordinary people could endure the shock? But the ones suffering the worst of all must have been the Bound themselves.

Wu Xingxue suddenly found the hanging bodies pitiful. He raised his head toward them.

“How long have you been hanging here?”

They twisted in the wind, sometimes turning their backs to him, sometimes their faces. As they hung upside down, the corners of their mouths crept to their ears in eerie smiles that seemed beyond their control.

“I…I don’t remember anymore.”

“It’s been a long time. It’s been so long.”

“Almost a hundred years?”

No wonder they speak this way, some claiming they’re alive while others say they’re dead, all chattering constantly, their memories lost in the fog, Wu Xingxue thought. *Anyone robbed of their soul and trapped in a hellhole like this for a century would end up rambling cryptically or laughing at nothing.*

“Where were you born?” he asked next. He doubted they could recall any real details and did not expect useful answers, assuming they’d say *I forgot* or *I can’t remember anymore*. But to his surprise, they spoke up one after the other:

“Lang Province.”

“Gui Province.”

“I’m from Xiyuan.”

“The foothills of Mount Immovable.”

One answer after another drifted down like a tide, washing over him. Wu Xingxue was so overwhelmed his ears began to ring. “All right, all right,” he said. “I got it.”

They’re from all over the world.

Wu Xingxue pondered quietly. They were in a shrine, a place associated with offerings and sacrifices. These souls were most likely bound here for that reason. As he opened his mouth to ask who had bound them here and why they’d been chosen, Xiao Fuxuan put out a hand to stop him. The Tianxiu Immortal leaned in so close his lips nearly brushed Wu Xingxue’s ear.

“There are certain things you must not mention…including the source of their resentment,” Xiao Fuxuan whispered, as though he could read Wu Xingxue’s thoughts.

Wu Xingxue felt a bit dizzy. He knew Xiao Fuxuan had leaned in only because he didn’t want those hanging overhead to hear, but *still*…

Blinking a few times, Wu Xingxue collected himself. “Why?”

Xiao Fuxuan’s gentle voice remained barely audible. “It could elicit malice or grudge. We don’t yet know the purpose of this forbidden domain, so we shouldn’t provoke them.”

“Fine…” muttered the archfiend. He stayed still until Xiao Fuxuan moved away, then wrapped his winter coat tighter around himself until his ears were shielded by fox fur.

While they whispered to one another, the bodies hanging from the rafters continue to move back and forth, but no matter where they drifted, their gazes remained fixed on the two intruders. The stretched-out sockets of their rolling eyes gave them a focused, sinister look. After watching for a while, several of the hanging bodies shrugged their shoulders. Several others started to move surreptitiously. Countless arms, elongated to the point they seemed boneless, descended from above like flesh-colored vines in an inverted forest. They opened their mouths wide as their snakelike arms wound toward the men below. All the while, the shrine remained perfectly silent.

Neither Wu Xingxue nor Xiao Fuxuan turned back even once, as if totally unaware of the disturbance above.

“But I have another question,” Wu Xingxue said solemnly.

“Speak.”

“What if they provoke us first?”

“Then we have only one choice… We must kill them.” With a flick of his thumb, Xiao Fuxuan drew his sword through the air in a dazzling arc.

His blade’s piercing aura unfolded instantly, forming an army of wind-splitting frost blades. Without looking behind him, Xiao Fuxuan swept his phantom blades across the room. A flurry of wet pops and sputters sounded in the shrine as thousands of vine-like arms, a hair’s breadth from Wu Xingxue’s and Xiao Fuxuan’s backs, fell to the floor beneath a pandemonium of bloodcurdling screams. The next second, the cold phantom blades whipped around and charged straight toward the hanging bodies with the intent to kill.

The creatures writhed frantically in a futile attempt to dodge. Their voices cried out as the phantom blades were about to pierce the tops of their heads.

“Ah—”

The blades came to an abrupt stop as they touched the hanging ones’ scalps. They could sense clearly that they were on the verge of being cleaved in two, yet the blades never drew an inch closer. The anticipation was agonizing, an excruciating torment that sent shivers rippling through their bodies. The ropes squeaked loudly.

“Now that someone’s finally come,” Wu Xingxue said, his gaze raised upward, “did you think you could catch us and hang us up there in your stead?”

The hanging ones trembled, afraid to utter a word, and the shrine fell under a shroud of silence that was itself a confession. Still, Wu Xingxue

wasn't exactly angry. As unique as this situation was, it felt surprisingly familiar. The bodies stuffed into the acolyte statues, the souls bound in this shrine—they all sought hapless souls to take their places. Unfortunately for them, they happened to have targeted not-so-hapless souls.

"Can I make a deal with them?" Wu Xingxue asked Xiao Fuxuan.

"When have I tried to stop you?"

Satisfied, Wu Xingxue turned his face back to the Bound. "How about this—you've been here longer than we have, so you know this place better than we do. Explain the true circumstances of this forbidden domain, and we'll figure out a way to release you from your soul bondage."

To his surprise, the faces spun toward him slowly, one after another.

"You can't release us."

"How can you be so sure?" asked Wu Xingxue.

Cautiously eyeing the suspended blades, they stretched out their necks and repeated confidently, "You can't."

Wu Xingxue was about to ask again when he noticed something strange about one of the hanging bodies. Compared to the others, this one seemed more lucid, with his eyeballs alert and unclouded. Wu Xingxue poked Xiao Fuxuan, then pointed up.

"That man. What's wrong with him?"

"His body is probably about to wake, so his soul is struggling."

His body? "Do you mean that his body is about to realize that he's no longer alive?"

"Not about to. He already knows."

The man struggled, his face so contorted it was almost right side up again, the dark bags under his eyes so prominent he could barely open them. He squirmed toward Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan as his mouth opened and closed like a silent, dying fish.

After another moment's struggle, he cried out, "It's so horrible…"

Wu Xingxue squinted at the man's eye bags, then grabbed Xiao Fuxuan.

"I know who he is now," he whispered.

The man's face was upside down and so stretched out it had been nearly unrecognizable, but as he spasmed, he twisted just long enough for his features to resettle, providing Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan a brief glimpse of a familiar face. There could be no mistake—the hanging man with the prominent eye bags was the innkeeper.

What does that mean? wondered a flummoxed Wu Xingxue. *What could the innkeeper be doing here?* He recalled that the innkeeper was thwarted from speaking openly about the forbidden domain, and several things fell into place. *What if these bound souls are not offerings? What if these souls were dragged from their flesh and bound in this forbidden domain to anchor their undying bodies to Blossomfell Terrace? What if the legends are wrong, and sealing away the Arbor Divinus requires not just arcane formations or hidden entrances but many, many people? What if the innkeeper is just one of many, merely stationed to guard the entrance? What if—*

Wu Xingxue froze as a horrifying realization struck him. Xiao Fuxuan had said that the bodies of the Bound continued to live among mortals, growing younger and older cyclically. Though they mimicked the living so

well that even the gods found them difficult to identify, any abnormality was most noticeable to those closest to them. However, what if those closest to them were bound as well? What if all of their neighbors were the Bound? Who would be left to detect their condition?

Someone—Wu Xingxue could not remember who—had told him that Blossomfell Terrace was once known as a uniquely wonderful place in the mortal realm. No matter how chaotic the world was, Blossomfell Terrace remained peaceful, vibrant, and opulent, alive with the hum of conversation. Some attributed this stability to the Arbor Divinus and believed its vital energy protected the area. In hindsight, it made no sense: How could turbulent times *not* affect the living?

What if the whole bazaar was bound? What if the vibrance and opulence were long dead, and any semblance of life was an illusion courtesy of the Bound's undying bodies, trapped and condemned to perform the opening of the bazaar forever? They would light the lanterns on the third day of the Third Month, day after day, year after year, their soulless bodies operating under a shroud of self-delusion—growing up, growing old, making small talk with others.

Wu Xingxue's expression was as still as stagnant water as he examined the tightly packed faces. On closer examination, he found several familiar faces: the chubby porter from the inn, the tea stall worker hawking miraculous tea, the storyteller with the sky-high cheekbones at the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar entrance, the shop attendant explaining the accident that had spilled cosmetics all over the street. Eventually, he couldn't distinguish whether he recognized these people because of his recent visit or because the past Wu Xingxue had encountered them as well.

He took in the faces of those who'd brought such liveliness and clamor to the streets of Blossomfell Terrace, those who'd lit candles to illuminate four miles of mountain terraces and brightened the night with a trail of lanterns that wound along its paths like a dragon. These were the residents of the same Mount Blossomfell Bazaar that Wu Xingxue once praised to so many others—the spot where he first came into the world.

Chapter 42:
Causality

THE INNKEEPER'S SOUL let out a feeble cry, equal parts sorrowful and hauntingly shrill.

"It hurts, hurts, hurts…" he chanted. What began as a cathartic shout weakened into a mumble, and when he could no longer cry out, he wept. He reminded Wu Xingxue of a gravely ill person roused from unconsciousness and fighting to remain lucid before inevitably succumbing to sleep once again.

One by one, the other hanging ones turned to the innkeeper. They had been whispering amongst themselves, echoing each other's slightest stir in a cacophony of chatter. Now, they fell quiet as gravestones as they observed the innkeeper. Though the skin at the corners of their mouths stretched to their cheekbones, their upside-down expressions appeared mournful.

"Why is he crying?" someone asked.

Like a single drop of water in boiling oil, a shudder erupted through the hanging souls. The shrine rang with so many cries that they flooded Wu Xingxue's ears. He was suddenly drowning in disgust at this forbidden domain, its shrieking souls, its infuriating blasts of wind, its acrid air. A chill coursed through his veins, and an unaccountable contempt surfaced in his heart.

Even without my memories, my heart is so cold. How cold might it be if I remembered?

And what had he thought when he'd found this place the first time?

Clang—

The clash of metal filled the temple as Xiao Fuxuan's sword sliced through the smoke.

Wu Xingxue came back to the present with a start. The Sword of Absolution sliced across the rafters in an arc of golden light. Even without seeing its wielder's expression, he could feel the ruthless chill of the sword's intent. The Tianxiu Immortal delivered both punishment and amnesty. Since the people of Mount Blossomfell Bazaar trapped in this place were innocents, Xiao Fuxuan could deliver these people if he so chose. Wu Xingxue believed this, and clearly, so did Xiao Fuxuan.

Pure golden light sent tremors through the entire forbidden domain, forcing the dust and smoke into a thick gray fog overhead. The sword sliced through the souls with an unstoppable force that wrapped them in its golden glow. Layer after layer of gold seals flowed and flashed like images of mortal sins forgiven. The jaws of the shocked souls dropped at the sight, and their tears stopped as flames of desperate hope rose in their wide eyes. But as Absolution's cold edge scoured the rafters, nothing changed. The tightly clustered ropes tethered to the hanging souls squeaked and swayed still. As quickly as it appeared, the hope in the eyes of the Bound was extinguished.

Xiao Fuxuan frowned. He raised a hand and caught his sword, then studied its ever-circulating golden pattern. In the space of a breath, he threw it again, swinging backhand, but the result was the same—the blade passed through the ropes as if they were ethereal, immune to even the Tianxiu Immortal's exoneration.

The hanging souls stared at the ropes holding their bodies and said nothing. Though they'd been crying pitifully moments before, their eyes were

not red but as blank as ever—like they were cloaked in layers of mist. Finally, their chattering began again.

"See, I told you so. You can't release us."

"I knew it."

"Forget it. There's no hope."

"But I feel so terrible."

Xiao Fuxuan caught his sword again and flexed his fingers, a hint of irritation in his eyes. He grew pensive. Why could he not absolve these people?

"Xiao Fuxuan," Wu Xingxue called. The contempt that had chilled him to the core faded a little with the presence of the man next to him. Because when Xiao Fuxuan had first drawn his sword—before Wu Xingxue had recognized with a start that a fiend like him was incapable of anything beyond killing—he'd tried to deliver these souls from their bondage.

Even if he'd been unsuccessful.

"Could this also be an illusion?" Wu Xingxue asked. "We entered this forbidden domain through an illusion, so maybe the only thing we can do is observe."

"Are you comforting me?"

That was part of it, but Wu Xingxue did not say it to offer hollow comfort alone. The truth was, he didn't fully understand what Xiao Fuxuan meant when he'd said the illusion wasn't real but did show events that had happened. They'd seen the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar of the past, but what now? Could they change anything? If not, then how had Wu Xingxue been able to speak with the innkeeper and porter or threaten the Feng Clan? It felt

as if he had travelled back several hundred years to the real Mount Blossomfell Bazaar.

If he could change it, was this illusion really just an illusion?

"When I first entered the bazaar, I thought it was an illusion, but now I'm not so sure," replied Xiao Fuxuan. He paused with a frown but did not elaborate on what had caused his doubt. "Even in an illusion, this is not what should happen when I draw my sword."

"What should have?" Wu Xingxue asked curiously.

"If the illusion could not withstand the force, it would dissolve. If the illusion could withstand the force, it would change. Either way, something would happen." Xiao Fuxuan fell quiet and gloomy as he contemplated the situation.

Watching sourness overtake Xiao Fuxuan's handsome face, Wu Xingxue could almost see the unspoken *Unless…* written there in giant characters.

"Unless what?" Wu Xingxue prompted.

"Unless—" After one word, Xiao Fuxuan noticed he'd been baited to open his mouth and closed it again. He pursed his lips, and his dark gaze fell on Wu Xingxue.

Wu Xingxue could tell Xiao Fuxuan had an explanation, but it was one that he did not wish to speak aloud. After a long pause, Xiao Fuxuan looked away.

"There can only be one reason why my exoneration had no effect."

"What is it?"

Xiao Fuxuan's eyebrows drew together. "I myself am a part of this causality."

Stillness fell over the shrine once more.

"I don't understand," said Wu Xingxue. "Why say you're a part of this?"

"Blossomfell Terrace gave rise to the Arbor Divinus, which was sealed away for some reason," Xiao Fuxuan said with measured calm. "This place became a forbidden domain, leading to these souls being bound here. These events make up a chain of causality, and I…" He faltered for a moment, the furrow of his brow deepening as he continued. "I was involved in one of these events, so I cannot absolve them."

It was a long time after he finished speaking before he raised his eyes again. As Wu Xingxue stared without wavering into Xiao Fuxuan's face, he noted a glimmer of hesitation and confusion there. The tension in Wu Xingxue's heart relaxed. He hadn't realized how tense he'd been.

Being a link in the chain Xiao Fuxuan had described could not be good. But who else could have been involved? Aside from those closely tied to the Arbor Divinus itself, the only possibilities were whoever sealed this domain in the first place or whoever shackled these souls within.

That must have been why Wu Xingxue's past self had tampered with Xiao Fuxuan's memories—this so-called causality.

Xiao Fuxuan thought the same. To Wu Xingxue, he murmured, "I…"

"It's not because of you," Wu Xingxue said.

As Xiao Fuxuan stood with his back to the candlelit shrine, his eyes seemed darker and deeper. He was always aloof, sometimes a little haughty,

but it was his sharpness that was fundamental. Even when his piercing nature was sheathed like a sword in a scabbard, it glinted in the corners of his eyes or the angles of his brows. Yet his gaze toward Wu Xingxue then, though heavy with implications, was anything but sharp.

"You are not the cause of their suffering," Wu Xingxue said softly.

"Why not?" Xiao Fuxuan's stare was unflinching.

Wu Xingxue's lips parted and closed again.

Xiao Fuxuan gave him a moment before he pushed. "Why are you so certain?"

The Tianxiu Immortal never spoke empty words nor placed unfounded trust in speculation. When suspicion fell on him, he refused to deny blame unless he could say for certain he was not involved, no matter how much he might want to. He was known throughout Urbs Caelestia as impartial with others *and* himself. He could tolerate any degree of distrust with perfect calm even when his own innocence was in question. This quality also seemed innate, as if nature itself had designed him this way. How else could he have been worthy of invocation as the god of penance?

But at times like these, there was one person whose certainty, unfounded or not, Xiao Fuxuan cared about. That person's conclusions were not the sort one might draw from systematic investigation of the facts or careful deduction. They belonged to him alone and came without explanation, on instinct.

"I just feel certain," Wu Xingxue answered. "Am I not an archfiend? Archfiends aren't known for their reason."

All the years they'd spent apart began to drift like the smoke veiling the forbidden domain—rising, falling, stinging at Wu Xingxue's eyes and throat, only to vanish with the slightest breeze. That lost time no longer felt like an untraversable chasm.

"Oh!" Without warning, there was a surprised cry followed by a sharp intake of breath. A swell of murmuring discussion filled the air.

"How can this be?"

"It's been ages since the idol stirred."

"What's happening…?"

Idol? Perplexed, Wu Xingxue turned to the altar.

The idol by the tablet reading *General Bai* had transformed. The young man was in the same position, the sword in his hand unmoved, but the once-bare branches of the jade Arbor Divinus were now dotted with flower buds. Wu Xingxue leaned in for a better look and discovered that some of the buds had blossomed. Each flower was wrapped in dewy green sepals with too many petals to count. In an instant, blooms covered the branches.

"Who carved this statue? Is it alive?" Wu Xingxue murmured.

He wasn't expecting an answer, but the Bound replied as one: "The Arbor Divinus itself…"

Wu Xingxue paused in surprise and exchanged a glance with Xiao Fuxuan. "The Arbor Divinus itself? You mean to say the Arbor Divinus shapeshifted into a human?"

The souls shook their heads as their many tongues responded.

"I don't know."

“Didn’t seem like shapeshifting.”

“It’s just rumor.”

“That’s what the legends say.”

Wu Xingxue pointed at the jade youth. “Is he what the Arbor Divinus shapeshifted into?”

“No, no, no.” The Bound shook their heads again.

“Then…who *is* he?”

Chapter 43:
Rekindled Fate

THE HANGING ONES clamored to reply.

"A general."

"A young general."

"They say he died beneath the Arbor Divinus."

"But why did the jade tree change?"

"It must have been the two sword strikes."

"Yes, probably…"

One by one, they focused their bewildered gazes on Xiao Fuxuan.

When Wu Xingxue heard *"He died beneath the Arbor Divinus,"* his fingers twitched at his side. For one strange moment, he felt a pang in his heart, like he had seen the young man's death himself. He stared blankly at the idol until—as if in a trance—he stretched a hand toward the jade.

Visibly petrified, the Bound cried out like a flock of birds.

"Stop! You mustn't touch that statue!"

"It's carved by the Arbor Divinus itself and cannot be defiled!"

"Aside from itself, whoever touches it will meet their—"

Before the voice could finish, the Bound's calls plunged into a state of confusion. Wu Xingxue held the jade carving, but nothing had happened.

No, there *was* something: A prolonged gust of wind blew through the shrine. A force within the jade statue seemed to have stirred.

When Wu Xingxue's eyelashes fluttered, Xiao Fuxuan grabbed his wrist. "What is it?"

A long silence passed.

"Nothing," Wu Xingxue declared eventually.

But that wasn't quite true. When he'd touched the statue, a slip of spiritual consciousness had passed through his fingertips. It melded into him, like a fragment he'd left behind in the idol long ago had returned to him. Suddenly, he remembered a few things—about both the Arbor Divinus *and* General Bai.

Once upon a time, long before the Spirit Terrace existed, a towering tree stood in Blossomfell Terrace.

Its canopy touched the sky, its roots reached deep into the earth, and its innumerable branches spread as wide and far as the clouds. Every cycle of life and rebirth resided within this great tree. Each time a baby was born, a fresh green shoot that bore a single flower bud sprouted from its branches. Whenever a body perished and departed the mortal realm, a flower withered and fell from the tree.

Ordinary people could not see the tree. It was visible only to those just born or on the brink of death who chanced upon it in a fated encounter. Some who narrowly escaped the jaws of death claimed they'd seen a sacred tree atop Blossomfell Terrace, and as time went by, rumors of the Arbor Divinus began to spread.

It was said that the Arbor Divinus appeared to decay and thrive simultaneously. Its canopy was a profusion of blooming flowers that radiated from afar, like endless dusk clouds beneath the setting sun. Below its canopy, in the depths of its sprawling boughs, petals rained without end, indifferent to

seasons or the passage of time. The fallen petals blanketed the mountains for four miles around, then drifted through rivulets and creeks until every stream flowed with cherry pink.

Though few had ever seen the place where water joined the mountains white and left for the wilds crimson, Blossomfell Terrace was world-renowned for its all-encompassing view of the unending cycle of life and death.

As tales spread, people erected a shrine at the top of Blossomfell Terrace to honor the great tree that they could not see. The cycles of existence held profound allure, and the shrine became one of the most vibrant places in the world. Countless mortals passed over its threshold and left a cornucopia of wishes for the future. At first, those wishes concerned life or death itself; pilgrims wished for the arrival of children, recovery from debilitating disease, safety for family left behind, or a hundred years of peace. Over time, the wishes became ever more tangled, and people began to perceive meaning in every tree they saw.

It was said that the Arbor Divinus, having received so much of humanity's joys, sorrows, and prayers, gradually developed a human aspect. Bit by bit, the tree's legend grew and changed. Those who managed to see the Arbor Divinus claimed they glimpsed an apparition in its verdant branches—a figure among the limbs that gazed down from a nest of blossoms over the shrine that grew livelier with each passing day.

More and more people erected buildings in Blossomfell Terrace, and many travelers traversed the land to visit in the Third Month of the year, when spring came and everything started to grow again. Eventually, this evolved into a bazaar.

Unfortunately, the Arbor Divinus was not immune to the much-despised but always-prophetic rule that all good things must come to an end. Those who first learned of the Arbor Divinus merely prayed to it. Later, it became the object of greed and impure intentions. The Arbor Divinus represented the cycle of rebirth and time flowing ever forward, so what might happen if a person borrowed a tiny spark of that power? Could they resurrect the dead? Could they travel back in time to undo their wasted years and start over again? These thoughts seduced many hearts, leaving them salivating at the potential.

The idea of the Arbor Divinus, once seen as a source of protection and stability alone, began to change. Unsavory actors used unscrupulous methods to cause trouble with the tree's power. Some people killed and some people died. These sins became links in the chains of causality entangling the Arbor Divinus.

The rumors whispered that it was *because* the Arbor Divinus had developed a human aspect that those chains were now wrapped around it. The tree could no longer escape the laws of the mortal realm, and so it must face tribulations.

In the year that the Arbor Divinus first became subject to fate's tribulations, the mortal realm was suffering in the throes of war. This was before Lang Province or Reverie were established; at the time, the world was composed solely of enemy states. The flames of war burned brightest in the southwest region, a cluster of small nation-states. The land there was painted in bloodstains a hundred miles wide and blanketed with corpses. Even adolescent boys were armed with swords and spears and sent to battle.

That year, at mid-autumn when the moon was at its fullest, a sorrowful sight unfolded in the southwest. On one side was the as-yet-unnamed Twilight Fen, where a battle had just ended. Errant flames burned over its sweeping wilderness, and the wind carried the stink of burning flesh and the mournful neighing of horses far into the distance. On the other side, thunder rumbled through Blossomfell Terrace as lightning descended from the Ninth Heaven so frequently that the bolts resembled a tightly woven net. Again and again, lightning struck the Arbor Divinus.

Amid the chaos, a blood-soaked youth emerged from the wilderness and approached the tree. He looked around seventeen years old but radiated a flinty aura of menace at odds with his young age. Slender and long-limbed, he was probably quite tall when he stood up straight. For now, he was stooped over from blood loss and the injuries that crisscrossed his body. It was evident he'd just slashed his way out of a battlefield.

He held a long sword in one hand and carried a bundle of bloodied cloth on his back. As he climbed over the hills, he clutched his sword tighter and stumbled. The bundle on his back jostled. Two thin arms covered in cuts and scars swung loose. Even at a distance, it was clear they belonged to a small, gaunt child who was already dead.

During those years, one often encountered children on the outskirts of battlefields. Orphaned by war and with no one to care for them, they either starved to death or were taken captive. Even their corpses were not left in peace, as scavenging beasts, ghouls, or starving people consumed them piece by piece until there was nothing left. Children who remained whole, like the one on the youth's back, were scarce enough to be counted on one hand.

The young man reached the shadow of the Arbor Divinus's canopy during a pause between lightning strikes. Blossomfell Terrace grew hushed. All the legends said that ordinary people could not see the Arbor Divinus, so those who came to Blossomfell Terrace often went straight to the shrine and never searched for the giant invisible tree. But this young man did not approach the shrine. Stopping beneath the tree, he leaned on his sword, swallowed the blood leaking from his lips, and raised his head.

He was strikingly handsome. Behind the blood and menace on his face was a bright-eyed, exuberant young man, his skin fair as white jade. That clean version of him would never show itself again. After he swallowed another mouthful of blood, he rasped out the words "I can see you."

Only the newborn or dying could see the Arbor Divinus, so the youth was near death. The dark-blue sky reflected in his eyes shimmered. As though he was trying to see every inch of the Arbor Divinus, he stared deep into its canopy.

After a while, his throat worked and he dropped his head. "You don't look like how the stories describe you…"

He was right. The Arbor Divinus had withstood dozens of lightning strikes as part of its fated tribulations; deep gashes marred its bark, and few blossoms remained on its branches. The ground below was covered in withered petals. The dusk-colored cloud and rouge-tinted moon of legend were nowhere to be seen.

The young man was nearly out of vitality, and he had struggled to make it this far. As he looked down, he held onto his sword and dropped to one knee. With the last of his strength, he turned over a patch of dirt at the base of the tree and buried the body of the child he'd carried. There was a

common belief that those under the watchful eye of the Arbor Divinus in death would have a peaceful, joyous existence in the next life and enjoy a hundred years of good health. The youth smoothed the dirt with his hands until he could hold on no longer.

He fell to a seated position, still grasping his sword as his head drooped to his chest. His bruised eyelids slowly lowered, and his eyes narrowed to long slits. Blood poured from his forehead into the hollows of his deep-set eyes, then slipped under his eyelids.

His consciousness had begun to fade, and he could no longer see any color save the crimson of blood. With his senses gone, he thought he was imagining things when an indistinct voice asked, “Who did you bury?”

He blinked slowly and said nothing at first. Was this one of the hallucinations that heralded death? Still, he parted his lips and murmured, "It's just someone I found…"

The child was in no way related to him, but when the young man had passed by earlier, the child had used the last of his strength to reach out for him. The child must have been afraid of death or being dismembered and eaten after it.

It took the young man a while after answering to wonder where the voice could have possibly come from. Rumors were that the Arbor Divinus had manifested a human form. Some had caught sight of an ethereal shadow sitting among the boughs. The young man's hand tightened minutely on the hilt of his sword. Between labored breaths, he choked down the roiling taste of blood. The knot at his throat bobbed. He wanted to open his eyes to check if anyone really was sitting in the tree's canopy, but try as he might, he could not blink away enough blood to see. He only knew that the indistinct voice had sounded as distant and frail as his, as if it were also suffering great pain.

He thought of the mystical thunder and lightning earlier and understood. If the Arbor Divinus could truly transfigure itself, then the long gashes on its body probably hurt terribly. No wonder its voice was so faint. The youth thought these things to himself and did not speak them aloud, but somehow the Arbor Divinus's branches rustled a few times as if it could hear him.

Then again, the rustling might have been nothing more than a near-death hallucination.

A sudden brightness filled the sky. The last few lightning bolts shot down from the Ninth Heaven to strike the Arbor Divinus's roots. The young

man squinted against the light, blood dripping from his eyelashes to the ground.

Does it hurt a lot? Well, I'm going to die either way…

As his blood seeped into the soil, the young man shoved himself up with his sword and placed his back in the lightning bolt's path. He shielded the Arbor Divinus.

The young man was surprised at the images that flashed through his mind in that final moment: the boundless wilderness, the corpse-strewn horizon, the withered petals blanketing the ground below the Arbor Divinus.

When I open my eyes in the next lifetime, will I see you bloom? he wondered.

Since the moment it'd come into existence, the Arbor Divinus had only ever heard people's wishes. Mortals always wanted something, *always*, and many had sought the tree's protection. This was the first and only time that someone had used their mortal, ephemeral body to protect it instead.

The young man closed his eyes and did not open them again. He did not see the apparition perched in the lofty branches above gradually blossom into a living human form.

Many years later, while people were still unable to see the Arbor Divinus, they found a skeleton where the tree grew. On its belt was a soldier's identification tablet marked with the title *General* and, below it, the surname *Bai*. Rumor was that the bones belonged to a general who'd died beneath the tree at age seventeen, before adulthood.

After his death, jadehaem grew where his blood had once flowed, and a patch of cool white encircled the Arbor Divinus.

One day, a jade carving appeared in the shrine of the Arbor Divinus. It depicted a cold but handsome young man leaning against a towering tree. The people were astonished beyond measure. No one knew where the carving had come from nor how it could have shown up out of thin air. Later, some said that a figure in white had entered the shrine the night before the carving appeared, then vanished without a trace into the mist. They speculated that the figure had been the Arbor Divinus made human, and that he'd carved the jade himself to honor the young general who'd died beneath the tree.

For the most part, these legends were true. There was just one more thing, known only to the one who'd carved the jade statue. As Wu Xingxue now remembered, he had imbued the jade with a fragment of his spiritual core and a drop of the young man's blood. If the young man reincarnated in the mortal world and chanced to return to this shrine, the spirit and blood within the jade would sense him—and the towering jade tree would recognize the soul of the young man who'd once leaned against it.

Wu Xingxue arose from the Arbor Divinus, and since the dawn of his existence, the only words he'd heard that weren't pleas or prayers had been the young man's: *"Does it hurt a lot? Well, I'm going to die either way. When I open my eyes in the next lifetime, will I see you bloom?"*

Wu Xinguxe had never anticipated that the Arbor Divinus would one day be sealed and confined with its shrine in this forbidden domain. He'd never expected the young general's ties to the Arbor Divinus would lead to his invocation as an immortal early in his next life—a divinity the Heavenly Principles bestowed with the name "Mian."

Many years later, but still long ago, Wu Xingxue had caught the scent of a familiar soul. He'd been standing on the white-jade steps to Urbs

Caelestia when he first saw Xiao Fuxuan ascending the stairs, long sword in hand.

Wu Xingxue's heart had throbbed with regret. He was not sorry that the reincarnated general had no memories of his previous life; he was sorry that Xiao Fuxuan would never see the white-jade carving that had been left for him, nor the thank-you gift hidden within.

Xiao Fuxuan had never learned of Wu Xingxue's thoughtful little gesture, and Wu Xingxue himself had forgotten it for over twenty years. He'd only recalled these images thanks to a chance encounter and a bit of spirit he'd left behind. He'd certainly never imagined he and the former young general would find themselves standing together in this shrine once more.

When Xiao Fuxuan's Absolution twice cut through the shrine, the jade tree with its hidden gift had recognized his soul and bloomed.

Its blossoms were for him alone.

Chapter 44:
Causality

IN THE SPRING FOLLOWING the year the jade sculpture appeared in the shrine, the warring factions had reached a temporary ceasefire. For the first time, Blossomfell Terrace held a true bazaar.

Because the Arbor Divinus appeared to decay and thrive in equal measure, displaying a canopy as broad as the clouds all year long, it had no flowering season. Everyone who saw the Arbor Divinus said that the flowers covering its branches resembled the red apricot blossoms of the mortal realm. Pavilion Mountain rose from the shore of the East River in the area now known as Reverie. The mountain's apricot forest stretched for three miles, and its flowering season peaked in the Third Month. Using Pavilion Mountain's apricot blossoms as a guide, the people of Blossomfell Terrace designated the Third Month as the Arbor Divinus's flowering season. Thereafter, the bazaar commenced each year on the third day of Third Month.

Wu Xingxue watched as the lanterns were lit on the opening night of the first Mount Blossomfell Bazaar. He hid behind the Arbor Divinus and looked down the winding mountain path that glowed when the sun began to set. Lanterns brightened, one string after another, each flame dividing into ever more lights that ran to the end of the mountains and into the horizon.

He eagerly observed the pedestrians packing the streets as tightly as embroidered threads and listened in delight to the incessant rise and fall of their mingled voices. Blossomfell Terrace was his birthplace, and he was very fond of it. He hoped the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar would always be this

lively, each year more prosperous than the next, so it would beckon people from all across the mortal realm as its renown spread. After all, the more celebrated it became, the more likely it was that the reincarnated young general would someday return.

Wu Xingxue held on to this idea for so long that it almost became second nature. His feelings for the place endured, even when the Arbor Divinus was sealed away and the shrine was no more. He never told anyone the origin of the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar, but whenever anyone mentioned it in his presence, he made sure to describe it as thrilling and vibrant.

Wu Xingxue cradled the jade carving in his hand and turned to the man beside him. He stared ahead for a long while before calling his name: "Xiao Fuxuan."

Xiao Fuxuan's hand was still on Wu Xingxue's wrist. His eyes had fallen on the blossoming jade branches of the Arbor Divinus, and for a brief moment, he was lost in thought. When Wu Xingxue called him, Xiao Fuxuan drifted back from somewhere in his memory.

That was when Wu Xingxue was struck by the hope that Xiao Fuxuan would recall what he'd said that autumnal night beneath the Arbor Divinus, while otherworldly lightning had flashed around them. Wu Xingxue would point at the flowers studding the tree, smile, and say, *Here they are, Xiao Fuxuan. Here are the flowers you wanted to see.*

But that night must have been painful for Xiao Fuxuan. How many people had he harmed in the war, and how many had done the same to him? His country, family, and comrades might have all scattered during those long nights clouded in the smoke of war. How many departed souls must have lingered along that stretch of wilderness he crossed to reach the Arbor

Divinus? How many had revered or despised him? When the lightning struck him and his body perished, was he lonely? Was he reluctant to depart?

Wu Xingxue's barely surfaced hope that Xiao Fuxuan might remember melted away.

It's best if you forget. Wu Xingxue shaped his parted lips into a smile. "Look. There are flowers blooming on the Arbor Divinus."

He turned toward the shrine to hide the hint of regret that flashed through his eyes. He was reaching out to replace the jade carving when Xiao Fuxuan's deep voice rang out.

"Wu Xingxue, are you the Arbor Divinus?" he asked.

Wu Xingxue froze in his tracks.

"They said no one can touch the jade carving aside from the Arbor Divinus itself. And before, you said that Blossomfell Terrace was where you came into the world."

Wu Xingxue turned back, but he held his tongue.

"Am I…" Xiao Fuxuan paused to take in the sculpture of the young man leaning against the jade tree, but his eyes soon returned to Wu Xingxue. "Am I General Bai?"

Fearing that Xiao Fuxuan might have remembered something, Wu Xingxue observed him cautiously. At last, he inwardly sighed with relief—Xiao Fuxuan's words appeared to be conjecture, not recollection.

"Their words are all jumbled up and incoherent, you can't take them at face value," Wu Xingxue said. "Why are you asking me, anyway? I'm even more confused than you are."

Xiao Fuxuan cast his gaze down at him. After a brief pause, he said, “You’re unhappy. As though *you’ve* remembered something.”

Wu Xingxue stiffened.

When he did not respond, Xiao Fuxuan lowered his head and reached out a hand, touching a curled finger to Wu Xingxue’s cheek. In a voice both warm and low, he asked, “Why does it bloom?”

The mighty archfiend was struck dumb. His hopes or regrets no longer mattered, and they vanished in a flash as a disconcerting notion crossed his mind—was the Tianxiu Immortal a face that launched a thousand ships in Urbs Caelestia?

Wu Xingxue was about to reply when an agitated stirring arose above them. He and Xiao Fuxuan went still, then returned their attention to the figures above them. The noses of the Bound twitched as they sniffed the air like hungry dogs, their faces fixed on the jade carving. Wu Xingxue sniffed at the air a few times as well and caught the scent overtaking the shrine. It was the smell of blood.

As Wu Xingxue swept his baffled gaze over the jade tree, he remembered that he’d infused it with a drop of blood from Xiao Fuxuan’s former body. Now that the carving was awakened, it was emitting the scent of that blood. Spirits were sensitive to the smell, so it wasn’t unusual that the Bound had noticed. What was extraordinary was their reaction. Their faces registered confusion, as if they were struggling to remember something long forgotten. Their mumbling washed over Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan like a tide.

“That smell…”

“I’ve smelled this blood before.”

“It’s so familiar.”

“It’s familiar to me too.”

“But from where?”

Their sniffling grew more pronounced as their appearances took on an increasingly uncanny cast.

Wu Xingxue was unnerved; he could not say why, but he *knew* that something was very wrong. “What’s the matter with them?”

The blood came from Xiao Fuxuan’s past life. The hanging ones came from Mount Blossomfell Bazaar. The bazaar had only existed since General Bai’s death, so no matter when the Bound had settled in Blossomfell Terrace, they shouldn’t have recognized the smell of his blood, let alone found it so familiar.

All at once, Xiao Fuxuan’s statement returned to Wu Xingxue: *“The souls of mortals reincarnate.”* The present-day occupants of the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar were the mortal bodies of each bound soul’s current incarnation. Bodies only last one lifetime, so the residents of the bazaar could not have known Xiao Fuxuan in his past life. But the Bound in the forbidden domain were souls, and souls do not change no matter how many lifetimes they cycle through.

Tension darkened Wu Xingxue’s face.

“Is the blood inside the jade carving yours?” Xiao Fuxuan asked suddenly.

“No,” Wu Xingxue replied automatically. As soon as the word left his lips, he winced at his carelessness—he’d just revealed he remembered

something.

Thankfully, the circumstances were not ideal for discussion, so Xiao Fuxuan just said, “Good.”

“What? Why do you say that?”

“Whatever a soul might remember can’t be anything good.”

Wu Xingxue’s heart leaped, but before he could ask what that meant, Xiao Fuxuan continued.

“Mortals do not retain memories from past lives, and neither do souls separated from their bodies. If an impression remains, it would have to be something that left a deep mark.” He paused then lowered his voice further. “It would most likely involve their death.”

Even without more explanation, it was easy enough to understand. For the dead, the moment of death was the most indelible memory. The very last moments of their lives were often the most painful, and pain long outlasts pleasure. The hanging souls had been torn from their bodies by force, so they should have remembered only what had happened in this lifetime. If they remembered something from before, it must have concerned death—which meant that Xiao Fuxuan’s earlier life was involved in the past deaths of the hanging ones. A chill snaked to the top of Wu Xingxue’s head, and he heard the familiar sound of a sword’s metallic ring.

Xiao Fuxuan’s figure shifted. Wu Xingxue snapped his eyes to the rafters above to find the Tianxiu Immortal’s sword already pressed to the forehead of one of the Bound.

“Please excuse me,” Xiao Fuxuan said quietly.

The pupils of the Bound one contracted sharply. When the sword touched his head, he let out a bloodcurdling scream sharp enough to pierce the clouds. A buzzing vibration shot through Wu Xingxue's body. The half-remembered impressions concerned death, so the easiest way to bring them fully to the surface was to call forth death once more. As sword song and screaming echoed throughout the shrine, the hanging one's eyes opened wide.

"I remember where I smelled the blood!" he cried out. "I remember…"

Though it wasn't a true "reckoning," it had achieved the same effect. Fragmented images began to fly past rapidly—a wilderness of endlessly stretching darkness, the neighing of panicked horses, and the gut-wrenching cries of slaughter. It was a battlefield, the same battlefield that General Bai once crossed. The Bound one recognized the blood in the jade carving because, in another lifetime, he met General Bai on that battlefield and died beneath his sword. In his last moments, his nose filled with the scent of blood covering General Bai's body.

The sword's ringing still echoed in the shrine, lingering in the rafters. Wu Xingxue turned through the fading image to meet Xiao Fuxuan's eyes. The fragmented images had stirred the other Bound souls' memories, and one after the other, their voices surged in a wave toward Xiao Fuxuan.

"I remember now…"

"I remember too."

"It was you."

"You killed me!"

Wu Xingxue had wondered why someone would use mortal souls to seal the Arbor Divinus and why these specific souls were chosen for the task.

If the seal required a connection between the souls and the towering god tree, why use people with no particular link to the Arbor Divinus?

Wu Xingxue saw that the answer was this: In Xiao Fuxuan's previous life as the young General Bai, he had traversed the fires of war and killed many people. Moments before his death, he gave the Arbor Divinus his protection and tied himself deeply to the tree. Someone had deliberately lured the souls of incarnations who'd died beneath General Bai's sword to the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar. Once there, they were torn from their bodies and confined in the shrine. The bloodshed linking the Bound to General Bai tainted the connection between Xiao Fuxuan and the Arbor Divinus and sealed the tree in this forbidden domain. No wonder Xiao Fuxuan could not free the Bound—to sever their bonds to this place, he would have to turn the Sword of Absolution on himself. Wu Xingxue's expression went cold.

A rare blankness came over Xiao Fuxuan's strong, handsome face. Pale as white jade, he sheathed his sword, though his hand still gripped the hilt. He silently regarded the trapped souls.

A strange feeling pierced Wu Xingxue's heart.

Chapter 45:
Hostage Taker

WHY SHOULD PAINFUL DEATHS, long forgotten beneath waves of reincarnation cycles, be dug up just to anger the souls once more? And why Xiao Fuxuan? All this for shielding the Arbor Divinus from a single lightning bolt from heaven? It seemed preposterous that someone would so elaborately exploit the moment Wu Xingxue had held close to his heart for all these years.

Such madness…I wish Xiao Fuxuan would forget any of this ever happened.

Wu Xingxue felt a sense of déjà vu as the wish surfaced in his mind. He must have had the same thought hundreds of years ago.

He wished the souls hanging overhead would forget too. Unlike the living, souls did not differentiate between current and past lifetimes. Exploited by someone with ulterior motives, the Bound were left only with instinct—whoever had taken their lives, whoever had condemned them to their present agony, *that* was their enemy.

"It's you!"

"It's your fault!"

"You caused me so much pain…"

"You cut off my arm just now!"

Lost in anguish, the souls shrieked and glared at Xiao Fuxuan. He'd chopped off their arms when they'd first tried to sneak up on him and Wu

Xingxue, but their fresh resentment reinvigorated them. Pale appendages unfurled from the stumps of their arms like burgeoning willow branches and formed a dense mass of limbs that reached for Xiao Fuxuan again.

Severing their arms anew was out of the question; the limbs would regenerate each time they were severed, again and again. The Bound's resentment would deepen with each attack until Xiao Fuxuan and Wu Xingxue grew too exhausted to defend themselves and perished. The situation was about to spiral out of control. Wu Xingxue instinctually reached for the object hanging from his belt.

These things are better off forgotten, he thought. It wasn't until his finger brushed the Dreambell that he remembered it was damaged, and he no longer knew how to use it.

Somehow, the indistinct peal of a bell chimed anyway. It was impossible to say where it'd come from, but the sound enveloped the entire forbidden domain. All at once, everything came to a stop—even the bitter smoke stopped blowing. The Bound froze as well, and their vine-like arms grew no longer. They stayed suspended in the haze, their outstretched hands a hair's breadth from Xiao Fuxuan.

Xiao Fuxuan stopped midway through raising his sword and snapped his head toward Wu Xingxue.

"Did you ring the bell?" Xiao Fuxuan asked in a daze.

"Wasn't me," Wu Xingxue said, just as confused. His white-jade bell hung mutely from his belt, still covered in fissures. The sound had come from elsewhere, though it chimed just like the Dreambell. Where had it come from, and who had rung it?

Wu Xingxue tried to discern the direction of the sound. As he listened, the effects of the bell washed over him, and he found himself thinking of Magpie Haven again. He immediately shook it off to find the Bound staring down at their own long arms. They looked at Xiao Fuxuan without recognition, then retracted their arms.

"How did my arms get so long?"

"Mine too. How odd."

"What was I about to do?"

"No idea. I'm a bit confused."

"Who are you people?!"

"This is a forbidden domain! How did you two get in?"

The souls faced Xiao Fuxuan and Wu Xingxue as though they'd never encountered them before.

"This forbidden domain is sealed with layer upon layer of arcane formations, blades and fire, and eighty-one bouts of lightning from the Ninth Heaven," they threatened. "How dare you intrude here?!"

Wu Xingxue was stunned at how quickly they'd forgotten. The mysterious bell seemed just as potent as the real Dreambell.

Abruptly, another memory hit him. When he'd first entered the inn, he'd noticed a white-jade bell nearly identical to the Dreambell hanging beside the counter. A moment later, as the ringing continued, another memory surfaced.

He handed the little white-jade bell to the exhausted-looking innkeeper and said, "I hear you never get a good night's sleep. Here's a little trinket to help."

The innkeeper accepted the bell but seemed uncertain. "A-are you a cultivator, sir? Is this some sort of magical relic?"

"Thanks to a chance encounter with a celestial, I learned how to make them. It may not qualify as a magical relic, but it works."

"What does it do?"

He thought about it and forced a faint smile. "It can exorcise fiends, ward away evil, and offer a little peace and protection."

The innkeeper was unconvinced, but "peace and protection" were hard to come by, so he hung the bell by the counter.

Wu Xingxue snapped back to the present. He'd realized the inn was out of the ordinary earlier precisely *because* of the imitation Dreambell near the door. At the time, he'd wondered where it'd come from.

It seemed that he'd spent a night at the inn several hundred years ago and discovered the forbidden domain. Not knowing how to address the situation at the time, he'd worried that the Bound would be exploited by the ill-intentioned or recall past grudges and cause chaos. As a stopgap measure, he'd left an imitation Dreambell at the inn to pacify the souls should they ever stir. Since it was not the real Dreambell, it did not require celestial energy to ring. It reacted on its own if the souls went into a frenzy. Its chime was most effective against the hanging souls, and its impact on people like himself and Xiao Fuxuan was less evident. Still, Wu Xingxue felt groggy at the sound of the bell.

"Such power from a tiny trinket…" Wu Xingxue mumbled, cupping the little bell on his belt in his palm.

Xiao Fuxuan hadn't moved; his eyes remained downcast as he listened, mind elsewhere. After a long pause, he raised a hand to his face and stroked a finger over the edge of his lips.

Wu Xingxue watched curiously. He was about to ask what was wrong when Xiao Fuxuan's gaze flashed upward, his eyes narrowing as if he'd remembered something. Guilt hit Wu Xingxue, and he swallowed his question. He suspected that the ringing bell had summoned another time Xiao Fuxuan had let down his guard and had his memory altered by the Dreambell.

As for why he touched his lips, well…

Wu Xingxue lost his train of thought as the bell continued to chime. He was getting more muddled. If he stood there and listened any longer, he feared he'd soon be back to talking about "Magpie Haven."

"Maybe we should clear out for the time be—" Wu Xingxue started, but a tall shadow appeared in front of him before he could finish.

The shadow pulled Wu Xingxue into its arms, and his nose filled with the Tianxiu Immortal's scent. Wu Xingxue's world darkened, and his feet lifted from the ground. Xiao Fuxuan whisked him out of the forbidden domain.

They were passing through the domain's entrance when Xiao Fuxuan spoke beside the tip of Wu Xingxue's nose.

"I kept wondering how I ever let my guard down long enough for someone to alter my memories." Xiao Fuxuan's breath tickled Wu Xingxue's lips. "You tricked me."

Wu Xingxue closed his mouth tightly. *I*...

He licked his lips and was about to answer when the world brightened around him. They'd exited the forbidden domain.

The first people he saw outside were the Feng disciples. They encircled the entrance with tense expressions, as if they wished to go in but dared not do so rashly, their long swords in hand.

Something occurred to Wu Xingxue then.

Every person in the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar was a bound soul; they'd been cycling repeatedly through young and old age for a century or more. Mortals who visited the bazaar once a year were unlikely to notice, as were celestials—like Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan—who came down to the mortal realm only occasionally. But there was one group who should have noticed by now that something was off: the Feng Clan.

Feng disciples watched over the entire Mount Blossomfell Bazaar and were summoned every time something went wrong. After so many visits, they surely knew the locals well enough to recognize their appearances at different ages. Not catching on for three or five years was one thing, but how could they have failed to notice anything suspicious in so many years? If they had noticed and were only pretending nothing was amiss, that was another story entirely.

Clearly, something was very wrong with the Feng Clan. Did they know more than they were letting on? Were they covering something up—or were they involved? Matters involving the Arbor Divinus and the forbidden domain could hardly have been common knowledge for mere clan initiates, so the clan leaders must have been pulling the strings.

How can I turn these young initiates into the leaders of the Feng Clan? he wondered.

Inspiration struck the greater archfiend. He was just close enough to Xiao Fuxuan to lean over and whisper in his ear. “Xiao Fuxuan, can we kidnap these brats?”

Ning Huaishan had never expected to get trapped on his own doorstep. He’d expected even less to get lost in an illusion like the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar, but there he was, no archon and no Fang Chu.

While he searched all four miles of the bazaar, he thought ruefully, *What the hell happens if I find the Tianxiu Immortal first? Would I look like a wuss if I turned tail and ran? Heaven, please hear me: May the archon watch over me and spare me from facing the Tianxiu Immortal alone.*

Ning Huaishan prayed the whole night through, and the heavens did hear *something*—the first person he found was Yi Wusheng.

Ning Huaishan was at a cosmetics shop, wondering how much makeup must have been spilled to drown half the street in the scent of face powder and rouge, when he sneezed ten times in a row. He damn near sneezed his brain out!

After the fit finally passed, he turned his head to rub his nose. By the time he turned back, Yi Wusheng was there. A cloth scarf covered his face from his chin to the bridge of his nose, and his exposed eyes and cheeks had the faint pallor of a sickly scholar. No one would have guessed he was a renowned figure from a prominent cultivation clan. Ning Huaishan curled his lip in disdain.

Yi Wusheng hadn’t realized this corner was occupied, but the string of sneezes had caught his attention. He looked startled to find Ning Huaishan, and they shared a brief moment of awkwardness.

“Finally, someone I know,” said Yi Wusheng, his tone suggesting he was rather glad they’d met.

Why are you still alive? Nothing but a remnant, but you’ve still got a longer lifespan than me, Ning Huaishan thought. He wanted his derision to show on his face, but he couldn’t stop sneezing long enough to look even a little menacing.

When Yi Wusheng saw Ning Huaishan’s discomfort, he began digging in his medicine bag.

Ning Huaishan squeezed his nostrils shut with a hand. “Stop it. Don’t go digging in there, I don’t want anything!” he complained in a nasally voice. “I’m not sick, so I don’t need medicine. The sneezing is just from the smell…”

Yi Wusheng held out a pill. “Our clan has pills to cure more things than one can count. We can treat sneezing from illness and sneezing from smells just as well. It’s only one pill. Try it.”

Ning Huaishan did not wish to try it, but his sneezes were getting worse by the minute. If this kept up, he was doomed to spray tears and snot all over the bazaar. As a fiend, he could not afford to embarrass himself like that. He reluctantly accepted the pill and swallowed it dry.

While he knocked it back, he heard a commotion in the market ahead of them that included a great number of footsteps. It sounded like a sizable group had just shown up. Glancing in that direction, he asked Yi Wusheng, “Did you see my archon? Or Fang Chu? I’ve been looking for them for ages. This shouldn’t have happened in the first place. We all entered Blossomfell Terrace together, so how did we split up as soon as we walked into this illusion? I can’t find anybody.”

Yi Wusheng shook his head. “I haven’t seen them either, and I looked for just as long. I planned to draw a talisman to search for them, but I was interrupted.”

Yi Wusheng had hidden the paper that allowed him to speak in his sleeve, so it sounded like he was talking normally. Wrapped in the scarf, he looked no different from a living person.

The footsteps sounded hurried as they drew closer and closer. Ning Huaishan craned his head to try to see them. “Whoever they are, it doesn’t sound like they’re here for a stroll through the bazaar…”

“They’re from the Feng Clan,” Yi Wusheng replied. “I just came from that way, and I saw a large group of Feng disciples with grim faces. I wonder what they’re here for.”

The Hua and Feng Clans were generational friends, but he didn’t recognize the disciples he’d seen. They were probably part of the illusion and belonged to a world hundreds of years in the past.

A group of people dressed in matching clan clothing approached. At their head was a man of indeterminate age. He was handsome, but his stern expression aged him beyond his years.

As a fiend, Ning Huaishan was sensitive to the scent of blood. His nose twitched in the air several times, then he saw the man’s hand. Several blood tracks wound over the back of his sword hand. He’d probably just been injured dealing with something unpleasant.

The man stopped and studied the inn next to the cosmetics shop. His expression was cold as he spoke to the young woman standing beside him.

“Shulan, are you certain the distress talisman you received was sent from here?”

Feng Shulan was a willowy woman with twin swords at her waist. She had a beautiful profile, and her lips curved in a resting smile, though there was no mirth in her response. “I’m sure. If it hadn’t come from this inn, I wouldn’t have bothered to bring you.”

Ning Huaishan eyed Yi Wusheng, who’d started at the woman’s name. “What? You know her?”

“That’s Feng Shulan, the previous head of the Feng clan. She passed away long ago.”

The version of Feng Shulan standing before them did not seem to have become a top figure within the Feng Clan just yet. Like everything else in the illusion, she was from a far more distant past.

“Did the distress talisman state who has them trapped?” asked the man leading the group.

Feng Shulan hesitated for a moment. “It did.”

“Who?” the man said in a low voice.

She did not answer right away.

The man turned to her impatiently. “Why are you being so evasive? Only a fiend or monster could have cornered a group of cultivators. We deal with fiends and monsters all the time! What has you acting this way?”

“It’s…not a fiend,” she answered after some thought.

“Then what is it?”

“They said it’s Xiao Fuxuan, the Tianxiu Immortal.”

The man fell silent.

What?! Ning Huaishan brightened when Feng Shulan mentioned that name, then remembered that finding Tianxiu before the archon wasn't exactly good news.

He was about to feign ignorance and flee when the piercing vital force of the Tianxiu Immortal's sword aura lashed out from the inn like an invisible whip. It struck the crowd gathered at the inn's entrance with a sharp, painful crack, then transformed into a long rope coursing with otherworldly lightning. In a flash, it lassoed the Feng Clan—along with Ning Huaishan and Yi Wusheng, who had the misfortune of standing too close to them—and dragged them inside without so much as a by-your-leave.

Brute force was common among fiends but unheard of among celestials. As Ning Huaishan flew horizontally into the inn, one burning question occupied his mind: *Why doesn't the Tianxiu Immortal act like a god?!*

Chapter 46:
Ruffian

NO ONE LIKED BEING TIED UP, let alone a short fuse like Ning Huaishan, let alone *times two* when he was tied in a bundle with his least favorite person, Yi Wusheng! Unable to contain his anger, he let loose a torrent of cursing as he was yanked into the inn. "Fuck your—"

The expletive died in his mouth as soon as his eyes landed on the Tianxiu Immortal's stone-cold face. He sheepishly swallowed back the long list of Xiao Fuxuan's ancestors meant to follow that "your."

He snapped at Yi Wusheng instead. "What are you shoving me for?"

Yi Wusheng knew he did not deserve the abuse but chose not to sink to Ning Huaishan's level. "I didn't mean to. There are just too many people in here."

The inn was small to begin with—just two levels plus an attic. The first-floor lobby where they were huddled was the most spacious area. Yi Wusheng scanned the room.

It'd been packed even before the latest batch had been tied up and dragged in to join them. There were people tied around each of the lobby's four tall pillars. Based on their clothing, they appeared to be Feng disciples. Oddly, the disciples had paper talismans stuck to their foreheads, a sight both ridiculous and humiliating. The younger disciples were red-faced with anxiety or anger (hard to say which), while the older ones had shut their eyes to the world around them, their faces stretched longer than mules'.

Wide-shouldered and slim-waisted, the culprit—the Tianxiu Immortal—leaned against the counter. His fingers didn't move as his sword aura wove languidly between them, and his nonchalance only enhanced his intimidating presence. The boisterous Feng Clan members fell into a tense silence beneath his glare as they were dragged into the hall.

Yi Wusheng, who had rarely experienced such displays of force, was momentarily tongue-tied. "This is…this truly is…" he murmured.

Ning Huaishan, better adapted to the hostile atmosphere, had no trouble replying. He kept his voice down, though. "This really doesn't seem like something an immortal would do."

"Is this…how things are done in Nightgleam?"

"Hell no. If this was Nightgleam, they wouldn't just have talismans stuck to their foreheads. I doubt they'd have heads at all."

That's true. Yi Wusheng fell silent.

Ning Huaishan grunted and looked around. He suspected his archon was in the inn as well. He had absolutely no idea what to do next, but the Feng disciples nearby were faring much worse than him, at least. The rope in which they were bound was the Feng Clan's own spirit-binding rope, and the talismans stuck to their foreheads were the Feng Clan's own silencing talismans. That was as embarrassing as it could possibly get. Several of the Feng disciples were writhing with fury.

The woman named Feng Shulan put her thumb on the tip of her index finger and made an inconspicuous flicking motion toward their leader. Brow furrowed, he stared intently at Xiao Fuxuan, who was nearby but did not

seem to notice the signal. The leader, with his arms still tied behind his back, knocked his fingers lightly on the floor in response.

This was the Feng Clan's secret etheric whisper technique. Though the leader's face was dark with rage, his knock on the floor was gentle as he sent his secret message: *‹How could so many of our disciples have been captured?!›*

Feng Shulan was a gorgeous woman, but she worried too much, and her face showed a hint of fatigue. When Feng Huiming questioned her, her natural smile nearly turned upside down.

‹Elder Huiming, as I told you before—› she began.

Feng Huiming's jaw worked. He wiped the blood from the back of his hand and interrupted her. *‹When you sent word earlier, I had a guest. I was unable to spare the attention.›*

‹Was it really a guest? You seem to be wounded, Elder. I wanted to ask you about it earlier—›

‹It's nothing, just an old injury. Continue with what you were saying.›

Seeing that he had no intention of answering her, she pursed her red lips and resumed explaining what had happened before: *‹At first, we thought it was just a minor issue here at the bazaar. It's happened before, and as usual, we sent a few initiates to handle it.›*

But the initiates had never come back, and soon after, the Feng Clan's Hall of Disciples had received a distress talisman containing the following words in a graceful hand: *Your initiates have been taken hostage. Please come save them.*

The Feng Clan was well regarded. They'd faced threats and intimidation before, but the oddly courteous tone of this distress talisman had thrown them off a bit. Regardless, initiates being taken hostage was a serious matter, so the Hall of Disciples had dispatched eight higher-level disciples. They had protocols in place for dealing with such matters, after all.

Yet, against all expectations, the plum blossoms had bloomed a second time. The Hall of Disciples had received another distress talisman composed in the same graceful script: *These disciples have been kidnapped as well. Please stop sending amateurs and bring someone in charge.*

As the chief of the Hall of Disciples, Feng Shulan was "someone in charge," but she'd been feeling unwell of late, and the disciples had not wished to disturb her. Provoked and unwilling to back down, they'd decided to send four "gilded" disciples after the hostages. As the most gifted of the younger initiates, any one gilded disciple could stand on their own, let alone four!

Alas, all four had been captured. By the time the Feng Clan had received the third distress talisman, the disciples dared not delay escalating it up the chain of command any longer. The writing on the distress talisman remained as polite as before, but it jabbed: *You must have too many disciples.*

As they'd prepared to alert Feng Shulan, the Hall of Disciples had sent a talisman back, asking: *Who is the one causing this havoc?*

They had not truly expected an answer, so they'd been quite surprised when they'd received one. The talisman had consisted of only three characters, each written in an unfamiliar hand as cold and formidable as a honed blade: *Xiao Fuxuan.* The Hall of Disciples had been shocked; even

Feng Shulan had been struck as dumb as a wooden chicken when she saw the name.

That sense of confusion had remained as the golden sword aura snared her and dragged her into the inn. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't reconcile the Tianxiu Immortal's status with his actions.

‹Xiao Fuxuan only enforces heavenly edicts and deals with the most wicked and formidable archfiends. Why would he pick a fight with a mortal cultivation clan? It doesn't make sense.›

So concluded her summary of events. As Feng Huiming listened, his expression grew dimmer and dimmer.

Feng Shulan waited before asking another question. *‹Elder Huiming, I only train the disciples. I'm not involved in other affairs, and I have no intention of intruding, but…if I'm missing any inside knowledge, please enlighten me. If I'm going to die here, I'd like to know why.›*

‹What are you even talking about? Why did you jump to that conclusion?› He softened his tone to something more consoling. *‹We're a proper cultivation clan, and we have nothing to hide. Certainly nothing that would make us enemies of a celestial. Don't overthink it. From what I've heard, the Tianxiu Immortal has never conducted his business like the other celestials of the Spirit Terrace. He acts without compassion or mercy, and he prefers to solve problems with swords rather than words. Come to think of it, his behavior suggests a military background. Generals, soldiers—their actions can make it hard to tell if they're friend or foe. But Urbs Caelestia and cultivators are on the same side, so there's no need to panic.›*

The tension drained from his face as he spoke, and he appeared content that this was a simple misunderstanding.

Feng Shulan remained unconvinced, but she knew Feng Huiming was right about at least one thing: Urbs Caelestia and the cultivation clans were on the same side. Whatever else Xiao Fuxuan might have been, he was still an immortal, and there were lines that no immortal would cross, no matter how harsh and intimidating his ways. That was likely why neither the innkeeper nor the porter had been tied up.

Feng Shulan glanced at the innkeeper and chubby porter behind the counter only to notice both were trembling with their hands tucked in their sleeves. As she studied the hostages further, she made a chilling observation. Of all of them, only two were not Feng disciples. At first, she'd assumed they'd been captured by mistake, but then she began to detect some abnormalities: One was clearly a fiend, and the other had no life force at all.

The Tianxiu Immortal's sword shifted. With a loud metallic clang and a shower of gold sparks, his sword aura maneuvered through the crowd to land unerringly on the obvious fiend. At first, Feng Shulan and Feng Huiming were unfazed—cultivators routinely killed weaker fiends on sight—but they were utterly confounded when the ropes binding the fiend loosened. He stood up without the aura having harmed a single hair on his head.

The main hall was now full of confused Feng disciples. There was a second clang as the ropes around the lifeless man next to the fiend dropped and he got up as well. Scariest of all, when the young fiend leaped to his feet, he did not run out the door. Instead, he walked across the crowd *toward* Xiao Fuxuan.

"My lord, is my archon here?"

The famously taciturn Xiao Fuxuan actually answered him, tipping his chin in the direction of the stairs. "He's upstairs."

Feng Shulan's jaw dropped, and the Feng disciples were just as flabbergasted. Seeking guidance in the chaos but still restrained by the silencing talismans, the disciples turned their gazes to Feng Shulan and Feng Huiming. This made it very clear who was in charge. Before Feng Shulan could react, the Tianxiu Immortal tracked the disciples' eyes to her location.

An otherworldly gale swept through the room, and Feng Shulan turned her head away instinctively. When she opened her eyes again, the younger disciples had been pushed against the walls, clearing a space in the middle of the main hall and leaving Feng Shulan and Feng Huiming isolated, immobilized, and utterly helpless. Xiao Fuxuan, who had been leaning on the counter, was before them. Resting the tip of his sword on the floor, he addressed them in a voice like ice.

"Has someone in charge finally arrived?"

His words carried a crushing pressure, and Feng Shulan's throat tightened to the point she could not speak. She turned her head to Feng Huiming. As the elder, he was left in charge when the Feng clan patriarch was unavailable. All the blood had drained from Feng Huiming's face, and his lips were almost gray. He raised his head and fumbled with his words several times until he found his voice.

"I wonder…I wonder what matters of import…you've come to see our clan about…Tianxiu?"

"You tell me." Xiao Fuxuan bent closer to them, his hand still on the hilt of his sword. His apathetic gaze swept over the lobby, and the meaning of his question was plain on his face: *We're here in this inn, so what else would I be asking you about?* He was plenty intimidating when at his full height and

even more imposing when he brought his narrowed eyes near their terrified faces.

After a few moments, Feng Huiming seemed to coalesce into a sturdy mountain rock, and his body went rigid. His eyes drifted sideways to avoid Xiao Fuxuan's glare. He tried to take a calming breath. Unfortunately, he caught sight of something even more disturbing—a man wrapped in an overcoat descending from the inn's second floor.

The man paused to look at them from afar. "So, their leader finally can't sit on the sidelines any longer?" he asked.

The candlelight did not quite reach the stairs, making it difficult to identify the man's features until he came forward. When Feng Huiming got a good look at his face, his rigid posture broke down completely. His unconcealed horror was so extreme that even Wu Xingxue was taken aback.

To Xiao Fuxuan, Wu Xingxue mouthed, *Am I* that *scary?*

With his hands wrapped around his hand-warming stove, Wu Xingxue replaced the curiosity on his face with threatening flatness and loomed over Feng Huiming.

"My only intention in luring you here is to ask you a question. What does the Feng Clan have to do with the forbidden domain behind this inn?"

What on earth is wrong with you?! Feng Huiming wondered. He cradled his wounded hand, wishing Wu Xingxue would just kill him already.

"You asked me the exact same question about two hours ago!"

Chapter 47:
Feng Clan

"WHO ASKED YOU the same question? Me?" asked WuXingxue. That *Me?* was heavy with meaning, but he kept his voice steady and his tone unhurried to conceal any hint of surprise.

Feng Huiming's lips quivered. He did not answer, but his expression said it all.

Wu Xingxue turned to look at Xiao Fuxuan, confusion flashing briefly on his face, then turned back to Feng Huiming. By the time his eyes met Feng Huiming's again, Wu Xingxue's neutral expression had returned, as immovable as a mountain.

Feng Huiming swallowed, keeping his voice low. "You ask, yet you already know the answer."

Judging by his demeanor, Wu Xingxue was certain Feng Huiming spoke the truth—someone had sought him out two hours earlier and asked the exact same question. *And that person looks exactly the way I do right now.*

Wu Xingxue touched his own face and swiftly evaluated the situation.

After revealing his name, Xiao Fuxuan had dropped his glamour, but Wu Xingxue still wore the face Xiao Fuxuan had given him earlier. The only person whose face was identical to his would have to have been the Wu Xingxue from the past, also disguised with a glamour. This deduction seemed obvious but raised several major problems.

When he and Xiao Fuxuan had arrived at the inn last night, the innkeeper had said they'd only just checked out. That was a remarkable

coincidence, to be sure, but it was hardly extraordinary in and of itself; the entire Mount Blossomfell Bazaar was an illusion, so there was a chance they might encounter versions of themselves from several hundred years prior. But Feng Huiming said Wu Xingxue had questioned him just two hours ago.

This sounded, at first, like two interpretations of the same melody. Several hundred years ago, Wu Xingxue had left the inn without removing his glamour, paid a visit to the Feng clan, and interrogated Feng Huiming regarding the forbidden domain. Right on the heels of that interrogation, the hapless man had been captured by the present-day Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan. This explained Feng Huiming's words—even the timing lined up just right. And it was precisely because everything lined up so well that Wu Xingxue was suspicious. The Mount Blossomfell Bazaar was an illusion, but the Feng Clan was not. They existed beyond the perimeter of the illusion, and events occurring inside the illusion couldn't possibly be consistent with events occurring outside of it. Not *this* consistent, at least.

Wu Xingxue could think of only one explanation: This Mount Blossomfell Bazaar was not an illusion, but the actual past! When they'd stepped into Blossomfell Terrace, they'd passed into this place as it existed hundreds of years ago. This explained everyone's reactions, from the innkeeper to the leader of the Feng Clan. From the innkeeper's point of view, Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan really had checked out of the inn after one night before almost immediately returning to stay a second night. From Feng Huiming's perspective, the same man had approached him twice in one day to ask the exact same question. It was truly bizarre, enough to drive anyone mad.

If Feng Huiming had been allowed more time to reflect or probe further, he might have noticed certain discrepancies. For instance, that the person he'd seen just two hours earlier was wearing a different outfit and hairstyle—or more tellingly, that the celestial he'd met had become a fiend. Alas, Wu Xingxue was not about to leave Feng Huiming any time for further reflection. He briefly met Xiao Fuxuan's eyes and decided to strike while the iron was hot, before Feng Huiming got wise to the real situation.

Wu Xingxue stroked the hand-warming stove, dropped his gaze, and commenced his performance.

"Good. Since I've asked you once already, I needn't waste another breath. You know full well what I want to hear. Now that we have more of an audience"—Wu Xingxue tipped his chin toward the rest of the room—"all you have to do is repeat what you said to me two hours ago so they can hear about it too."

"Why, you…!" Feng Huiming's face fell even further, his lower jaw so tense and tight that the bones cracked. He glared at Wu Xingxue and croaked, "I already told you everything. Why do I have to go through this again?"

Wu Xingxue gave this some thought, then went along with Feng Huiming's words. "What business is that of yours? Did I promise you I'd only ask once?"

Speechless with rage, Feng Huiming took ages to spit out his answer. "*No*, you did not."

"Well, that's that, then."

What do you mean "that's that"?! Feng Huiming was ready to argue when he heard Xiao Fuxuan's finger move nearby. His long sword, its tip

resting on the ground, made a faint noise. Feng Huiming stiffened.

"If it's the truth, what harm is there in saying it ten or even twenty times?" The Tianxiu Immortal tipped his head toward Feng Huiming.

Feng Huiming gaped at him.

Tianxiu's pitch-black eyes locked on him, glinting with cold light. "Or are you saying that even you can't repeat it?"

Feng Huiming's expression instantly went rigid.

Wu Xingxue had seen the change come over Xiao Fuxuan and raised an eyebrow. He'd assumed someone of Xiao Fuxuan's stature would struggle to lower himself to playing the ruffian. Wu Xingxue had never imagined that someone as reserved and stern as Tianxiu would be able to follow an archfiend's example and improvise on the fly. Xiao Fuxuan had not only taken hostages, he'd learned how to coerce a confession! The words coming out of his mouth sounded genuinely intimidating. They were enough to throw Feng Huiming off balance; his lips worked up and down as he struggled to think of a reply.

It struck Wu Xingxue that the Tianxiu Immortal beside him differed greatly from the Tianxiu Immortal known to the world. This new, strange immortal gave Wu Xingxue a sidelong glance, then averted his gaze. Wu Xingxue was confused as he tried to interpret the meaning of that incomprehensible glance. A rather bizarre thought occurred to him. It was almost as if Lord Tianxiu, in his first-ever attempt to behave so unlike a celestial, wasn't quite sure how far he should push it. If that was the case, he'd glanced at Wu Xingxue to gauge whether he was doing all right.

Wu Xingxue couldn't help looking at Xiao Fuxuan once more. His cold, handsome face appeared just as intense as before, and his crushing aura

remained as heavy as a mountain, but the longer Wu Xingxue looked, the more convinced he was that Xiao Fuxuan wanted feedback on his performance.

Wu Xingxue smiled. He could not hide the amusement shimmering in his elongated eyes, so he stopped trying. As if Xiao Fuxuan could sense it, he looked back. He seemed caught off guard.

Feng Huiming, meanwhile, was about to lose it. People always used their own conduct as a yardstick to judge others; honest people didn't assume others were out to deceive them, while schemers and liars believed everyone was plotting against them. This was doubly true for someone with a dark secret and a guilty conscience.

Feng Huiming saw traps everywhere. When Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan exchanged a glance, Feng Huiming thought, *I must have slipped up when I was talking earlier and made them suspect me.* When Wu Xingxue asked him to repeat his story, Feng Huiming thought, *He found some flaw in my narrative—he's testing me.* When Xiao Fuxuan told him that there was no harm in repeating the truth, Feng Huiming thought, *This isn't a test—this is blatant mockery.* And when Wu Xingxue smiled, Feng Huiming's only thought was *I'm done for!*

Feng Huiming felt like an insect trapped and toyed with by cruel children. No matter which way he crawled, he would crash into a wall. His futile struggle accomplished nothing beyond amusing his tormentors.

The room was full of Feng disciples. Each of them, including Feng Shulan, was watching him. It was too much to bear.

He should have been accustomed to being the center of attention. He occupied a lofty position within the Feng Clan, and he wasn't merely an

elder. The Feng patriarch, who had no children of his own, had adopted both him and Feng Shulan. Feng Huiming had joined the Feng Clan long before Feng Shulan; he wasn't even eight years old when he walked through its gates.

"Eight is just the right age," the patriarch told him. "Old enough to understand some things, and just young enough to not understand too much."

At first, Feng Huiming hadn't grasped the true meaning of these words, but after ten, then fifty, then almost a hundred years, he had come to fully comprehend them.

"Old enough to understand some things" meant Feng Huiming knew that he wasn't part of the Feng bloodline and that the patriarch wasn't his birth father. Thus, no matter how proud, cherished, or nurtured he was, he would know his place. He would not grow conceited from the attention lavished upon him nor take everything he had for granted. *"Young enough to not understand too much"* meant that he was at the age when children yearned for a place to call home. Even knowing he was adopted, he would dig out his own heart and offer it in return to an adoptive father who treated him kindly.

Feng Shulan was far more self-possessed than Feng Huiming. Outsiders called her the Feng Clan's "precious pearl of a daughter," but though the patriarch had adopted her just like Feng Huiming, she'd never considered herself his daughter. Instead, she saw herself as a disciple with a slightly deeper connection to the clan. Feng Shulan had never been particularly sociable or warm, and she only became colder as she aged. She had no intention of involving herself overmuch in clan affairs. She was content to act as Chief of the Hall of Disciples and teach swordplay.

In contrast, Feng Huiming knew far more about the clan's dealings. He'd once believed his superior knowledge had been the result of the patriarch's favor. He assumed he was superior to his "little sister" Feng Shulan and earned the patriarch's esteem with his talent, strength, and other exceptional qualities. This explained why he was entrusted with information that could not be shared with outsiders and why he was permitted to follow the patriarch to places forbidden to other disciples.

Feng Huiming's position in the Feng Clan had grown to be second only to the patriarch. When the patriarch was indisposed or absent, Feng Huiming was left in charge. As the patriarch grew older and Feng Huiming entered his prime, he gradually replaced him entirely, acting as leader even when the patriarch was present.

Yes, Feng Huiming *was* accustomed to attention, and few things could fluster him. He handled most situations with ease, exuding a rocklike steadiness that commanded respect without relying on anger.

Only now did he realize his failings. Other clans had many disciples in their prime—the Hua Clan nearby, for instance, that shared close ties with theirs—but none of them had taken on the role of a leader. They were not yet qualified.

He'd thought himself qualified until today. He hadn't met enough people and lacked the diverse experiences to know otherwise. His days of charging ahead fearlessly with a blade had been confined to the mortal realm. When faced with a true celestial, he amounted to nothing at all.

A young stranger had appeared in the Feng Clan's library about two hours earlier.

Feng Huiming rested a finger on the sword atop his desk and thought smugly, *This man is utterly unaware of just how out of his depth he is.*

Wasting no time with questions, Feng Huiming drew his sword as fast as lightning. The man hadn't even touched his own.

With such a slow reaction time, how dare he barge into the Feng Clan's Hundred Treasures Library?

But as his sword thrust toward the intruder, Feng Huiming saw something amiss: The young man, who looked like no more than a wealthy scion, was staring right at the tip of Feng Huiming's sword. To the intruder, Feng Huiming's lightning-fast move was slow enough to track with a casual glance.

By the time Feng Huiming realized his folly, it was too late. The intruder met Feng Huiming's eyes. His sword stopped mid-thrust. Instead of piercing the young man's flesh, the blade was ensnared in a deep ocean, unable to strike or retreat. A crushing aura as vast as the Boundless Sea poured from the young man and overwhelmed Feng Huiming. His sword hand quivered, and his veins bulged beneath his skin, forming a pattern that raced from his fingertips up his arm. Feng Huiming groaned as agony tore through him.

His fingers went slack, his sword clattering to the floor. It spun there in a lazy arc as blood dripped down his arm to puddle at his feet.

Feng Huiming could feel each place on his arm where his veins had ruptured, yet he was aware that his opponent had exercised the utmost restraint. Given the momentum behind the intruder's aura, it was a miracle that Fei Huiming was still breathing. He began to quake with true terror. Having rarely met his equal in the preceding century, he'd long believed he

was destined for greatness. Realizing that he, too, could be nothing more than an ant was a shock he could barely withstand.

If he wanted to, Feng Huiming could've summoned several thousand people to the library within a few seconds. Many disciples were on daily patrols nearby, and his "little sister," Feng Shulan, was only a little farther. But Feng Huiming did not call for a single person. It would make no difference against this opponent, and he couldn't bear the thought of anyone seeing a disciple of his renown unable to hold his own sword. He was paralyzed.

"Wh-who are you?"

"Who I am has nothing to do with you," the intruder replied. "I'm only bothering you because I have a few questions to ask."

"What…what questions?"

Throughout their exchange, the man never touched the sword at his waist. He held a silver-filigreed mask in his hand, one edge pinched between his thumb and forefinger. It twinkled like a star in the lamplight.

"Are you aware that all the people in Mount Blossomfell Bazaar, thousands of them, are Bound?" the man asked with a tilt of his head.

Feng Huiming went rigid as cold sweat dripped from his pores. Before he could answer, the man nodded.

"Looks like you knew," he said. "I must be in the right place."

Feng Huiming opened his mouth. "I—"

The intruder did not wait for him to finish. "Let me ask a little more. Are you aware that those bound souls have been confined to a forbidden domain?"

Feng Huiming's throat spasmed. The intruder's midnight-black eyes were fixed upon him, and after a moment, he smiled. Feng Huiming suspected the intruder was wearing a glamour—his features were handsome but not exceptional, and they didn't match his eyes at all. His smile should have been beautiful as it lit up his face, but the corners of his eyes didn't stir. The smile was more like an obscuring fog than anything else.

"Seems like you knew that as well," the intruder said.

Questions whirled through Feng Huiming's head: Where had this man come from? What were his motives? Why was he asking about the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar they had concealed for so long? But the other party did not give him much time to consider possible answers. While Feng Huiming had been caught in his thoughts, the intruder had moved in front of him. This time, there was no miracle to spare him from the crushing aura.

"Those people inside Mount Blossomfell Bazaar—those thousands and thousands of souls—did the Feng Clan put them there?"

It was only after Feng Huiming came to his senses that he realized he'd involuntarily nodded in reply.

"Yes…"

Chapter 48:
Proof

As the word left his mouth, Feng Huiming froze in shock. *Why did I say yes?!*

His bafflement registered on his face. He licked his parched lips, intending to shake his head and shout, *No! I misspoke! My clan didn't gather them there!* But his head was immobile, as if his neck was caught in a pincer hold, and the tip of his tongue seemed spellbound too. He could not utter a single objection.

There in the Feng Clan's Hundred Treasures Library, Feng Huiming met the unfamiliar eyes of the intruder with an ocean-deep aura. He found himself unable to offer a word of justification. Cold sweat trickled past his bloodshot eyes. He opened and closed his mouth several times and squeezed his fingers into fists, but all he managed to get out was "W-we didn't intend for this to happen."

Fuck me!

Never in Feng Huiming's life had he cursed such vulgar words. Now, he swore silently not just at his futile struggling, but because he sensed something was seriously wrong with him. His tongue was no longer under his control; he'd said things he'd *never* intended to utter. A commoner would probably have believed they were under the influence of evil spirits, but Feng Huiming was no ordinary commoner. He was the Feng Clan's second-in-command! Who could do such a thing to him—and who would dare?

Feng Huiming's eyes bulged as he stared at the intruder before him. For a moment, he almost thought the man was the one doing it. Someone with such a domineering aura could easily control him at this distance. However, if the intruder was questioning him about the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar, why would he manipulate his suspect into giving inaccurate answers? It had to be someone else manipulating Feng Huiming's words.

Feng Huiming stared at the intruder in an attempt to convey the truth: *What I said before was a lie! That wasn't what I meant to say. Someone is tampering with my words. Don't listen!*

Try as he might, he could not say these words aloud.

The intruder watched Feng Huiming's face the whole time he struggled. A light furrow appeared between his brows before it smoothed out again.

"How about this?" the intruder said. "Let me try another question."

Feng Huiming nearly wept when he heard that. He had the feeling that the intruder sensed the turmoil beneath his expression. Still, the intruder was unsure whether Feng Huiming was being honest or putting on a show.

"All right," the intruder said. "What is the relationship between the Feng Clan and the forbidden domain in the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar?"

There is no relationship! Feng Huiming shouted in his head until he was psychosomatically hoarse.

He'd been fully prepared for his words to get stuck in his throat, but then the intruder narrowed his eyes and softly repeated, "There is no relationship? Nothing at all?"

Feng Huiming realized that, this time, he'd managed to say the words in his mind unaltered. At first, he was delighted that he'd succeeded in speaking the truth aloud, but then a jolt of fear ran through him. If he'd spoken the opposite of the truth and said, *The relationship is significant*, the intruder would have known for certain that something was wrong with him. Now that he'd spoken the truth, the intruder was less likely to believe Feng Huiming was being manipulated. After all, if he were, why would he have been able to tell the truth one moment and lie the next? This mix of lies and truth only made it seem like Feng Huiming was being deliberately cryptic.

Cold sweat poured down Feng Huiming's frozen face. Though he'd barely spoken, he felt a buzzing in his head, and his thoughts became a tangled skein. He rushed to better explain himself to the intruder.

"Yes, our clan is aware that everyone in Mount Blossomfell Bazaar is Bound. Yes, we have heard the rumors that their souls are imprisoned in a sealed-off, forbidden area. After all, Mount Blossomfell Bazaar is under our protection. But I swear, we have no idea how or why those souls were chosen and gathered there."

To clear up what that meant, Feng Huiming needed to start from the very beginning. "This is a long story," he began. "I was still little at the time, and I heard most of this from Fa—from the patriarch…"

Two hours later, that smile that had never reached the young intruder's eyes still lingered in Feng Huiming's mind. Seeing the same smile on Wu Xingxue's face only intensified his panic. He stopped struggling, darted his eyes over the many Feng Clan disciples in the room, and glanced at Feng Shulan. He clenched one fist and made up his mind.

“Fine…fine,” he said with a long sigh. “If you want me to say it again, I’ll say it again.”

He attempted to recall all he’d said when he’d been terrified in the Hundred Treasures Library, but his mind was in such disarray he could only grab bits and pieces. Under Xiao Fuxuan and Wu Xingxue’s gaze, every second of silence was suffocating, so he decided to string together whatever scraps he had and build from there.

“Father—I mean, the patriarch—once told me that, many years ago, people with impure intentions used the Arbor Divinus to trigger several catastrophes. Innocent people met tragic ends, and others were caught in the crossfire. These instigators could not escape their own unfortunate ends and ultimately reaped what they sowed, but after so much pain and disaster, everyone realized that the Arbor Divinus was unsuited to exist in the mortal realm. They decided it ought to be hidden somewhere mortals could not go. This was the origin of the seal.

“At our clan’s inception, we didn’t bear the surname Feng, which means ‘to seal.’ According to the patriarch, after the Arbor Divinus was sealed away in Blossomfell Terrace, we changed our surname to Feng because we were entrusted with guarding this region to prevent anyone from entering the forbidden domain and wreaking havoc. It’s not quite the same as a name conferred to a celestial by heaven, but it’s a similar concept.

“So, *yes*, we know what the people of Mount Blossomfell Bazaar are, and we know where the forbidden area is located. But that’s the extent of our connection. The rest has nothing to do with us. As for the souls…” He glanced at the innkeeper, reluctant to discuss this in front of the Bound, then gritted his teeth and continued. “As for why the souls were gathered and

confined here, you'd have to ask the person who cast the seal on the Arbor Divinus."

Feng Huiming neither hesitated nor faltered on his last sentence, as if he knew exactly who'd cast the seal. If what he said was true—if his clan had taken the name "Feng" after being entrusted with guarding the forbidden domain—then the Fengs were closely linked to the Arbor Divinus and would know more than the celestials of Urbs Caelestia.

Wu Xingxue pondered this for a moment.

"Who sealed the Arbor Divinus? Was it the Spirit Terrace?" he asked.

"No," Feng Huiming said in a low voice, shaking his head. "The one who decided to seal the Arbor Divinus was the Arbor Divinus itself."

Hearing this, Wu Xingxue's gaze flickered. "The Arbor Divinus itself?"

Feng Huiming paused and looked up at him, bewildered. "Yes…?"

In the Hundred Treasures Library, the young intruder had not had the same reaction when he'd heard those words. He'd simply listened, calm as a still pool. The differing reactions resurrected Feng Huiming's disquiet.

He's trying to trick me again!

"It really was the Arbor Divinus itself! Every word I said was true!" Feng Huiming almost raised two fingers at the sky to swear, but then it occurred to him that he'd told a story from the patriarch and not something he'd personally witnessed. After a moment's hesitation, he opted not to vow to its veracity.

"Well, that is what I've *heard*," he continued. "The Arbor Divinus was sealed by the Arbor Divinus itself. He was the one who drew the borders of

the forbidden domain. The arcane formations, the lightning—all were put into place under his watchful eye. The Arbor Divinus knows everything that happens inside the forbidden domain. Before he left Blossomfell Terrace for Urbs Caelestia, he made sure his other form was properly sealed away and safe from further exploitation."

Feng Huiming gave his speech with exaggerated seriousness, but when he looked up, he found an inscrutable expression on Wu Xingxue's face. Feng Huiming faltered, then stopped caring what he had or hadn't seen with his own eyes. He raised two fingers to the sky.

"I swear to the heavens I haven't spoken a single false word. Everything I've told you is true."

After a long silence, Wu Xingxue addressed him softly. "You swear to the heavens, but I can just as easily make such a vow, ten vows, even. What good is swearing? I have no faith in that. Instead, why don't you tell me who can vouch for you?"

Feng Huiming paused for only a second before nodding. "I have proof."

Wu Xingxue was surprised. His curiosity was piqued, and he wasn't alone—everyone in the lobby stared at Feng Huiming, including a frowning Feng Shulan.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

Feng Huiming had been badgered for information twice that day. The first time, he'd relied on his silver tongue, but this time, he was so exhausted he wasn't sure he could talk any longer. He was on the verge of trying anyway when he thought better of it. After some internal debate, he made an

extremely difficult decision. He cast his eyes at the floor for a long time, then addressed Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan.

"You've questioned me over and over again. Even if I'm as eloquent as a lotus is beautiful, even if I repeat myself word for word a dozen times, you won't believe me entirely. I have a proposition. Come back to the Feng Clan with me, and I'll take you to see it. After all, seeing is believing."

Wu Xingxue was stunned. He'd never expected Feng Huiming to invite them to the Feng estate unprompted. He glanced involuntarily at Xiao Fuxuan. After all Wu Xingxue had experienced, he'd deduced that the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar was not an illusion but the real past. Still, no matter how certain he felt, it was still conjecture. If his theory was wrong, the illusory Mount Blossomfell Bazaar would collapse and vanish the moment they stepped out of it—and both the Feng Clan and the forbidden domain would vanish into the mountain fog along with it.

When he considered the possible consequences, Wu Xingxue was hesitant to take the risk. Just then, he heard Xiao Fuxuan's mild tone conveyed through the sword aura wrapped around him: *‹Doesn't matter if it's really an illusion. I got into the forbidden domain once, and I can do it again. You questioned the Feng Clan twice, so don't worry—we'll make sure you have a chance to question them a third time.›*

Wu Xingxue paused in surprise, then he smiled. As someone shrouded in fiendish energy and bound in chains that left him unable to do anything else but kill, his path should have been fraught with casualties, each step leaving a bloody footprint. But thanks to a certain someone, he was able to come and go as he pleased, unbound by law or limitation.

Chapter 49:
Divided Spirit

XIAO FUXUAN RELEASED the oppressive aura engulfing the entire inn. The Feng disciples regained their ability to move as the immense weight lifted from their bodies, but they didn't dare. They exchanged looks with their fellow captives before they turned to their leader for guidance. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to worry about them. With a taut expression, Feng Huiming rose from the floor and adjusted his robes. He wasn't disheveled, but his cheeks were a bit red.

Feng Shulan was well acquainted with his temperament and shot him several looks. "Elder Huiming, you—"

Feng Huiming interrupted her, precluding further argument. "I'm fine."

He'd said too much during his fit of desperation. Now that he had a moment to catch his breath, he felt more humiliated every second. However, what was done was done, and he had no choice but to turn a brave face toward the many pairs of watchful eyes in the room.

Feng Shulan came over to support him. Keeping her voice low, she said, "You shouldn't bring them back to the estate. At the very least, alert the patriarch beforehand."

"I know what I'm doing," Feng Huiming replied with a deep frown.

Feng Shulan looked unconvinced.

"Besides," he added, "the patriarch gave me permission to act at my discretion when he's unavailable."

Feng Shulan did not say more. Instead, she rounded on the initiates and raised her voice. “What are you all sitting around for? What, you can’t stand up? Are you waiting for me to come help you?”

She had upturned lips, but she disliked smiling, and her typical tone was blunt, bordering on sharp. As chief of the Hall of Disciples, she intimidated the initiates plenty, so they didn’t dare wait for her to help them up. Flustered, they scrambled to their feet, shook off the spirit-binding ropes, and removed the silencing talismans from each other’s foreheads. Their voices returned, but they stayed put in one corner of the room.

“Come here,” Feng Shulan said. The initiates gathered at her side obediently. She stepped aside to make way and pointed at Xiao Fuxuan. “Come thank the Lord Immortal,” she icily commanded the disciples.

There was a dismayed murmur from the initiates; the recent hostages could think of no reason to thank their kidnapper. Even Xiao Fuxuan seemed surprised as he shot a quick look at Feng Shulan.

“Thank him for what?” the initiates chorused once they’d gathered their courage.

“For exercising restraint,” said Feng Shulan.

Her words were both diplomatic and prudent. She’d described Xiao Fuxuan as *exercising restraint*, so he would be obliged to show mercy. Having given thanks to his face, the disciples would be spared from disaster should any further conflicts arise. At least, that would’ve been the case had they been dealing with a person who valued everyday social norms. Unfortunately, Xiao Fuxuan wasn’t such a person. Despite her miscalculation, Wu Xingxue still found Feng Shulan rather intriguing—more so than Feng Huiming, at least.

Wu Xingxue was not alone in feeling that way. Ning Huaishan nudged Yi Wusheng and whispered, “What did you say earlier? Didn’t you say this lass became—”

Yi Wusheng couldn’t help interrupting. “What did you call her?”

“I said ‘lass,’ you hear me? What now? It’s not like I called *you* that, so why the big reaction?” Ning Huaishan hated being interrupted.

Yi Wusheng stared at Ning Huaishan, unable to fathom why this fiendling who looked barely fifteen insisted on talking about others as if he were someone’s grandfather.

“Don’t forget that this happened hundreds of years ago. Logically, she’s your senior,” Yi Wusheng reminded him.

Ning Huaishan pursed his lips in her direction. “Fine, then how about I call her ‘respected elder’ and tell her you told me to do so? D’ya think she’ll come over here with her sword and cut your mouth off?”

Yi Wusheng fell silent.

“Suppose she might,” Wu Xingxue said softly.

“A-Archon.” Ning Huaishan dropped his petulant attitude like a hot coal.

While Feng Shulan had been ordering the Feng disciples to thank their captor, Wu Xingxue had overheard the conversation between Ning Huaishan and Yi Wusheng.

“You said earlier that this young lady eventually became…what, exactly?” Wu Xingxue asked.

Yi Wusheng was about to answer, but Ning Huaishan beat him to it. “The matriarch.”

Wu Xingxue hummed in acknowledgment, simultaneously surprised and not surprised at all. “You knew about this?”

“That’s right!” Ning Huaishan replied. The archon rarely praised him, so he was excited and immediately began showing off all he’d learned from Yi Wusheng. “She was the previous matriarch of the Feng Clan, but she passed away long ago.”

“The…previous matriarch?”

“Yeah.”

“When we entered Nightgleam, you said the current archon of Nightgleam, Xueli—”

“Ahem.” Ning Huaishan loudly cleared his throat at the name. He had no interest in hearing about the new archon!

Wu Xingxue looked between Ning Huaishan and Yi Wusheng. “Doctor, you said that Xueli was the child of an old friend—the youngest son of the previous Feng matriarch. Is Xueli this young lady’s son?”

Ning Huaishan went blank.

“The ages seem a bit off,” observed Wu Xingxue.

Yi Wusheng had been born a hundred years ago, but the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar was more than three centuries in the past. Cultivators often had long lives, so living for centuries wasn’t out of the question, but Yi Wusheng and Feng Shulan had been born generations apart. It was odd that they would have been friends.

Ning Huaishan opened his mouth but could not jump in with an explanation. “*You* answer,” he mumbled to Yi Wusheng.

Yi Wusheng didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but he maintained his calm expression. "My closer friend was her cultivation mate, not the matriarch herself, but I knew her. There was a substantial age difference between us, so it was an intergenerational friendship. Nevertheless…"

"Nevertheless what?"

"Well, it feels off to me anyway. If I take Feng Shulan's age and count backward to the time of the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar, she should be… younger right now. When I heard her name at the inn's entrance, I assumed I'd heard wrong. It was just so surprising."

After centuries of life, cultivators were seldom able to precisely remember their own ages, let alone the ages of other people. With a wave of his hand, Yi Wusheng added, "But what I know and what I remember aren't always that accurate. You shouldn't rely on what I think." Worried about embarrassing himself if he was mistaken, he changed the subject. "Honestly, I was even more surprised about the other one."

The other one? Wu Xingxue followed Yi Wusheng's gaze to Feng Huiming. "Why so surprised?"

"He and Feng Shulan are similar in age, but I've never heard of him," Yi Wusheng said quietly. It really wouldn't do to let anyone from the Feng Clan hear him lest it lead to a misunderstanding—anyone overhearing might conclude that Feng Huiming was destined to die young or meet some other terrible misfortune.

A different idea crossed Wu Xingxue's mind: If Feng Huiming had died young or met with tragedy, wouldn't lingering sorrow make him *more* likely to be remembered and memorialized? All things considered, Feng Huiming's situation seemed extremely peculiar. Then again, they were

worrying about something that hadn't happened yet, so their baseless conjectures counted for nothing.

They stopped discussing it for a few reasons. For one, Feng Shulan had given the initiates their instructions and nodded at them to signal their imminent departure. Feng Huiming stood at the inn's door but turned aside to let them pass. For two… Well, for two, the Tianxiu Immortal had distracted Wu Xingxue again.

Xiao Fuxuan had been eavesdropping on their conversation about the age difference between Feng Shulan and Yi Wusheng. At one point, he thought of something, turned on his heel, and ducked behind one of the red pillars. Yi Wusheng had been speaking at the time, and out of courtesy, Wu Xingxue did not look away. However, he'd kept a close eye on the pillar in his periphery. He could see little more than a corner of Tianxiu's robe and the tip of his black boot. The image was blunted, like a cat kneading at one's chest through many layers of fabric.

Xiao Fuxuan dropped his hands, and the sword aura swirling around his fingers went still. Just as he was about to step away, he heard a soft voice.

"And what terrible things could the great Lord Tianxiu be up to, sneaking around over here?" The voice ever so slightly dragged out these words, especially "sneaking."

Many people claimed that it tickled their hearts to hear Rex Spiritus speak in that tone. Xiao Fuxuan felt out of sorts whenever he heard such remarks. Most people assumed he just didn't want to hear about Rex Spiritus, but that wasn't quite right—rather, he didn't like to hear others talk about Rex Spiritus tickling their hearts.

Xiao Fuxuan turned around to see Wu Xingxue poke his head into his corner.

"I caught you red-handed," teased Wu Xingxue.

Xiao Fuxuan's gaze flickered. "And what did you catch me for?"

"Well, I'm really quite curious," Wu Xingxue drawled after a moment's pause. "What exactly are you up to hiding here?"

"Spirit division."

"What sort of spirit?"

"'Spirit' as in a soul."

Wu Xingxue was still confused. "Huh?" The greater archfiend's face was one giant question mark. *Can you divide something as precious as a soul? He's probably just teasing me while I have amnesia.*

Sure enough, Xiao Fuxuan scanned his face and decided that was enough teasing. "No, a 'spirit' as in spiritual consciousness."

"Ah." This he could understand; after all, he'd seen Xiao Fuxuan send his spiritual consciousness out of his body when they'd been with the Hua Clan.

He sure learns fast when he runs with a bad crowd. Of course, Wu Xingxue said no such thing out loud.

"Why do you suddenly need to divide your spirit?"

"It's a precaution."

Wu Xingxue recalled that Xiao Fuxuan had only hid behind the pillar after hearing what Yi Wusheng said about Feng Shulan and Feng Huiming.

He must have found the whole affair suspicious as well. “Can you divide your spiritual consciousness as a backup plan?”

“Kind of.”

Wu Xingxue contemplated this. Xiao Fuxuan had no idea what he was thinking, but his intuition told him it couldn’t possibly be anything good.

“Divide mine too,” Wu Xingxue said, confirming Xiao Fuxuan’s hunch.

Xiao Fuxuan stared back. His face betrayed nothing but the faintest tension of an oncoming headache—a headache that was spreading.

“Wu Xingxue…” he said heavily.

The archfiend sensed that Xiao Fuxuan was about to refuse and cut him off. “Does dividing your spiritual consciousness hurt?” He gave Xiao Fuxuan, who had just divided his own, a once-over.

After thinking it over a moment, Xiao Fuxuan spoke two words. “It doesn’t.”

“Well then, that’s that. It doesn’t hurt, and it leaves us something to work with just in case. Wouldn’t I miss out if I don’t do it?”

“Then miss out.”

Wu Xingxue went quiet. Everyone said that the Tianxiu Immortal yielded to neither force nor favor, and Wu Xingxue had just seen it for himself. He pursed his lips, then, after a moment’s speculation, turned around. “Fine. I’ll just ask Ning Huaishan and Yi Wusheng if they can help __”

Before he could finish, Wu Xingxue felt a tug on his long robes and turned to meet Xiao Fuxuan’s veiled eyes.

“Give me your hand,” he commanded in a low voice.

Wu Xingxue, mirth shimmering on his face, gave Xiao Fuxuan his hand.

His smile immediately froze. The instant Xiao Fuxuan’s warm, dry hand grasped his, the immortal’s vital force rushed into Wu Xingxue’s vascular system. Xiao Fuxuan’s vital force was just as unstoppable as his sword intent, impossible to ignore as it flooded Wu Xingxue’s veins. He could distinctly feel Xiao Fuxuan’s will pass through each of his body’s vital meridians. It blew through every gate as it rushed toward his heart.

Almost involuntarily, Wu Xingxue’s fingers clenched. The streams of vital force slowed as they approached his heart, then wrapped around it with the gentleness of a spring breeze. In that instant, he heard Xiao Fuxuan’s voice buzzing so near it practically brushed his heart.

“What do you take your spiritual consciousness for? You can’t have just anyone help you.”

Chapter 50:
Choice

WU XINGXUE COULD NOT have guessed that asking someone else to divide his spiritual consciousness would lead to such an outcome. *Had I known, I would've never—*

The thought was interrupted as Xiao Fuxuan's vital force reached into Wu Xingxue's spiritual consciousness. He forgot whatever words would have followed as he truly understood why not just anyone could do this for him. No one could guarantee they wouldn't kill someone who disturbed their spiritual consciousness. The natural instinct was to retaliate rather than expose all of your weaknesses. It was highly probable that anyone helping Wu Xingxue divide his spiritual consciousness would die a gruesome death. Likewise, it would be quite telling if that person didn't die.

Xiao Fuxuan did not die.

Wu Xingxue gently blinked as he felt a silky thread of his spiritual consciousness parting from the whole. It wasn't painful, not exactly, but it did feel extraordinarily strange. He wondered whether this feeling was unique to him or the same for everyone. As the thread split, an unexpected—and unpleasant—surge of emotions rose in his stomach. However, before he could grasp them, the thread of spiritual consciousness that'd been separated from the rest was set back in place, like a pond's surface that formed only two ripples before the water settled again.

"What's wrong?" Wu Xingxue blurted out.

"I changed my mind."

Xiao Fuxuan's vital force withdrew like a whisper from Wu Xingxue's spiritual consciousness but remained wrapped around his heart. When Xiao Fuxuan spoke, his voice seemed to emerge from Wu Xingxue's own body. It resonated deeply.

Wu Xingxue was caught up for a moment before he could continue. "You…changed your mind? How come?"

"No reason. I divided a bit of mine and left it here. That will suffice. You don't need to do anything." His tone was dark, and his words sounded final.

Wu Xingxue's confusion lingered until it occurred to him that Xiao Fuxuan might have stopped because he'd sensed Wu Xingxue's discomfort during the process.

Xiao Fuxuan noticed Wu Xingxue watching him and tossed out an explanation. "Having two divided spiritual senses could actually lead to conflict."

"Is that really a thing?"

"It is."

As if. "Prove it," said Wu Xingxue.

Xiao Fuxuan's handsome face went blank, and Wu Xingxue almost laughed. Whatever inexplicable emotions had stirred in him when his spiritual consciousness split had vanished without a trace. It was like it'd never happened; even he could not recall what the sensation had been.

Nevertheless, Wu Xingxue was feeling pretty perceptive as he peered at Xiao Fuxuan. He wanted to say, *I thought you didn't speak falsehoods. Why make an exception now?*

Due to certain elusive, delicate thoughts, he did not voice his question aloud.

Xiao Fuxuan's remaining vital force gradually slipped from Wu Xingxue's heart.

How strange.

When the immortal's vital force had first probed his veins, his entire body had gone rigid with disquiet. Now, as it departed, there was an empty space inside his chest.

Before the vital force retreated completely, Wu Xingxue heard and felt Xiao Fuxuan speak in his deep voice: "Vital force could be a conduit for etheric whispers, you know."

Wu Xingxue cocked his head at Xiao Fuxuan. "Etheric whispers? What are those?"

‹It means you can speak without opening your mouth,› said Xiao Fuxuan.

Xiao Fuxuan's lips did not move when he said this, but Wu Xingxue heard him crystal clear, right there inside. Heat gathered in the tips of Wu Xingxue's ears. He twisted his face to one side and covered it with the collar of his fur coat.

You're an archfiend, you know, he scoffed at himself.

Once they arrived at the Feng estate, they'd be surrounded by strangers. There would surely be occasions when they'd need to converse without speaking aloud. It'd be a lot easier if they could communicate using etheric whispers.

At least, that was the excuse he gave himself.

“Then you might as well stay,” he mumbled.

The wisp of vital force that had almost fully retreated tentatively returned. As it entwined his heart once more, Wu Xingxue heard Tianxiu’s reply echoing within his own body.

‹Okay.›

Wu Xingxue didn’t dare say another word. Once again, he wondered whether Xiao Fuxuan was toying with him on purpose.

Wu Xingxue was preoccupied as they traveled to the Feng estate. Nearby, Ning Huaishan yammered nonstop while Wu Xingxue replied intermittently. They might have even discussed spirit division at some point.

At the outskirts of the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar, Ning Huaishan slapped a paper talisman on the boundary stone and marked it.

“Fang Chu may be a pain and give me the stink eye every once in a while, but I’m a nice guy,” he said. “Not only do I refrain from sinking to his level, I just left him a note in case he’s lost. On his own, he wouldn’t make it back to Nightgleam in his next lifetime.”

Yi Wusheng didn’t understand why fiends needed to insult even those they were helping, but he patted the talisman down for Ning Huaishan anyway.

Once Yi Wusheng finished securing it in place, he paused for a moment, then shook his head and smiled. When he was young and impetuous, he could never have imagined he’d one day follow a road through the mortal realm to a fabled bazaar of centuries past, in the company of celestials and fiends alike.

“You sure hit the jackpot over the past few days,” Ning Huaishan said. “You’ve seen all sorts of things that other people wouldn’t see in a bunch of lifetimes. Say, y’think your soul remnant will last a little longer now that you’ve visited the distant past? Maybe you can squeeze a few more days out of it.”

“Enough with the jokes at my expense,” said Yi Wusheng.

“I’m not joking! We’ve traveled back in time hundreds of years. The possibilities are endless! And besides—” Ning Huaishan cut himself off, looking this way and that, before he grabbed Yi Wusheng and continued via etheric whispers.

‹Isn’t the reason you’re the way you are right now due to you-know-who beneath the Valley of Laments?› Ning Huaishan gave it a quick think, then whispered another harebrained idea. *‹How’s about the rest of us head to the Feng estate without you?›*

Yi Wusheng did not reply at first. He had a sneaking suspicion that this brat had been dreaming this up all day. *‹And where would I be going?›* he asked moodily.

‹Where?› Ning Huaishan looking at him like he was a complete idiot. *‹To the Valley of Laments, duh!›*

Yi Wusheng paused in surprise.

‹Who knows whether that guy’s even dead yet or if That tomb is there beneath the Valley of Laments,› Ning Huaishan continued. *‹If he hasn’t died, well, maybe you could try to stop the fight. And if he* is *already dead and his tomb’s down there, you can make sure the seals will actually hold. If that guy*

can never get out of the tomb, doesn't that mean none of this would have ever happened to you?›

With a shake of his head, Ning Huaishan lamented, *‹Look at me. You almost killed me once, yet here I am, coming up with ideas to save you. Who else in this day and age is as generous as I am?›*

Yi Wusheng silently cupped his hands and demonstrated the appropriate amount of admiration and gratitude to Ning Huaishan.

For a moment, Yi Wusheng's face was distant. Ning Huaishan's plan was actually tempting—far too tempting.

Yi Wusheng had begun cultivating at a young age. He loved listening to urban legends, and he'd heard many rumors about how one could resurrect the dead or start a life over again. As long as all who lived must eventually face death, people would gravitate toward these subjects. In retrospect, such rumors probably hid a shadow of the Arbor Divinus within them.

When Yi Wusheng heard the tales in his youth, he'd inevitably discussed them with Hua Zhaoting and Hua Zhaotai. Every time, they'd reached the same conclusion: Interfering with life and death violated both the natural order and human ethics, and thus it was forbidden.

But "forbidden" was just a word—a word often spoken far too lightly. Feng Huiming's claim that there would never be peace as long as the Arbor Divinus resided where people could find and exploit it made sense to Yi Wusheng. Presented with the opportunity to start over, he found he could not refuse it so easily himself. While Ning Huaishan walked beside him and continued to talk up the idea, Yi Wusheng listened and responded vaguely with everything but a simple no.

‹We're almost at the fork in the road,› Ning Huaishan said like a bewitching siren. *‹One way to the Valley of Laments and the other way to the Feng estate. You'd better make your choice now. It'll be pretty embarrassing if you change your mind later.›*

Yi Wusheng stopped in his tracks when they reached the foot of the mountain. There were indeed two clear paths. To anyone else, one road led to the Valley of Laments and the other led into the city—but to Yi Wusheng, one led to the possibility of life, and the other, certain death.

"I…" Yi Wusheng began in a haze.

It was only when Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan turned to him that he realized he hadn't used etheric whispering. He'd gripped the enchanted paper tight in his hand and spoken.

"What is it?" asked Wu Xingxue.

Yi Wusheng turned to him, then to Xiao Fuxuan. "I…" he repeated, swallowing. "I left something behind in the bazaar."

The Tianxiu Immortal's gaze fell on him. Everyone said that Xiao Fuxuan had eyes as cold as stars lit by sword intent. Even those with a clear conscience felt anxious and apprehensive under the full force of his gaze—and Yi Wusheng's conscience was far from clear. He dropped his head.

"Please go ahead without me. I'll catch up once I find it."

He didn't look up to see the expressions on Wu Xingxue's and Xiao Fuxuan's faces, so he couldn't say whether they believed him or not.

After a long pause, Wu Xingxue responded. "All right."

In the end, aside from the Feng clan disciples, only three people turned down the highway headed into the city. Yi Wusheng was not among them.

Though Ning Huaishan had goaded Yi Wusheng into this course of action, he was the first person to regret the doctor's departure. After Yi Wusheng left, the group's mood dropped exponentially. The Feng Clan were unhappy with the situation, and its members did not speak a word the whole trip. The only sound they made was the echo of their footsteps off the pavement and walls.

For some reason, Wu Xingxue's and the Tianxiu Immortal's moods had also soured.

"Ning Huaishan," Wu Xingxue said, turning his ink-black eyes on his underling.

Ning Huaishan shivered, his scalp tingling as he waited for Wu Xingxue to continue.

"What did you say to Yi Wusheng?" asked Wu Xingxue.

Ning Huaishan trembled. "U-um, nothing much." Before Wu Xingxue could ask again, he looked down at the ground. "Just some…some, um, he's going to die, you know? I just told him he could maybe do something about it."

His voice got quieter and quieter as the back of his neck went cold. He had the distinct feeling he was digging his own grave. His instincts told him that the archon was quite displeased, but when he stole a surreptitious glance, he found Wu Xingxue's bloodless lips pursed. He didn't look angry exactly, more like a little…disappointed. Then again, a look of disappointment was one thing on an ordinary person's face. On an archfiend, it could be more terrifying than displeasure.

Why would he have that expression? What could he possibly be disappointed about? Ning Huaishan couldn't wrap his head around it.

The truth was, even Wu Xingxue didn't understand it. He only knew that a disjointed *What a pity* had flashed through his head when he heard Yi Wusheng might try to change his fate. It felt as though, long ago, he had witnessed similar things and felt this same disappointment so often that it had become an automatic reaction. By the time he shook off the emotion, he noticed his fingers had moved to his waist, as if reaching for the hilt of a sword that wasn't there.

That's bizarre. Why am I going for a sword? As he looked down at his fingers, he heard Xiao Fuxuan's voice in his heart.

‹Wu Xingxue.›

Wu Xingxue curled his fingers and faced him.

‹My spiritual consciousness is tailing him,› whispered Xiao Fuxuan.

It took Wu Xingxue a moment to understand what he meant and reply through a whisper of his own. *‹You're talking about Yi Wusheng?›*

‹That's right.›

Wu Xingxue was flooded with relief. Just then, he heard Feng Huiming's voice call back from ahead.

"We're here."

The centuries-past winter night was just as shockingly cold as the one they'd left in the present. It had rained the night before, so ice coated the highway, and a cold fog enveloped the city. Within the fog, the covered lanterns were globes of glowing light, their flames shielded from the wind. In one area, there was a greater concentration of lanterns and signs of restrictive wards placed by cultivators. This was the Feng estate.

The Feng Clan was the biggest cultivation clan in this city. Unlike the Hua Clan of Peach Blossom Isle, the Feng estate resembled an official's residence. Its gates were wide, its eaves soared high, and an impressively tall pagoda overlooked the entire estate. The style gave the estate a majestic atmosphere, like a walled city inside a city.

A cultivation clan like the Fengs had many rules regarding the location of their estate. Clans could not establish their grounds just anywhere; they had to account for both geomancy and the vital energy of the land. That was why stepping onto a cultivation clan's estate often gave visitors the sensation of being infused with vital energy.

When Wu Xingxue stepped across the Feng estate's threshold, he felt a strange unease grip his body. The surge of vital energy felt somehow *off*, yet no one else around him seemed fazed in the slightest—not even Xiao Fuxuan.

Chapter 51:
Sanctuary

XIAO FUXUAN'S VOICE suddenly came from nowhere. *‹Not feeling well?›*

Wu Xingxue froze. *‹I didn't say anything.›*

‹I can feel it,› Xiao Fuxuan said.

‹You can feel that *much?›*

Xiao Fuxuan purred a quiet *‹Mm-hmm.›*

The vibration curled around Wu Xingxue's heart, sending a distracting tremor through his body. He was starting to regret having asked Xiao Fuxuan not to withdraw his vital force, but it was too late to do anything about it now without appearing indecisive or unreasonable. He forgot he'd told Xiao Fuxuan just hours earlier that archfiends weren't known for being reasonable. Perhaps the low hum of the Tianxiu Immortal's voice had shaken the memory right out of him.

Wu Xingxue felt like his soul was split in two. One half tried desperately to uphold his stoic, unmoved-by-storms facade. *I'm just not used to etheric whispering*, that side said. *It's not so bad that I need him to withdraw his vital force.* The other half wasn't having it. *Oh, it's not so bad, huh? Who do you think you're kidding?*

Finding his two bickering halves even more annoying than that chatterbox Ning Huaishan, Wu Xingxue silenced them both. His serenity didn't last long, because something hit him—earlier, Xiao Fuxuan had overheard Wu Xingxue's thoughts almost before he'd thought them. He'd

even replied. But now, as he debated with himself at length, Tianxiu hadn't say a word. Wu Xingxue was confounded.

‹Xiao Fuxuan.›

The vital force twitched, and Xiao Fuxuan replied with a hum.

‹I was just mulling over some nonsense. Did you hear it?› asked Wu Xingxue.

‹I did not.›

The greater archfiend stared at the man walking next to him. Was this what people called "selective deafness"?

Xiao Fuxuan let Wu Xingxue stare for a while before meeting his eyes. *‹What's the matter?›*

Wu Xingxue fumbled for something to say. In the end, he only managed to spit out, *‹Nothing.›*

What he was really thinking was this: *All those people in Urbs Caelestia who claimed that Xiao Fuxuan was inconsiderate—were they blind?*

The disciples acting as guards for the Feng Clan hurried over with lanterns in hand. First, they greeted Feng Huiming with a bow.

"Elder."

They turned next to Feng Shulan. "Chief."

The disciples greeted them in order of status, and though Feng Huiming held a higher position, it was evident that the disciples were closer to Feng Shulan. They had all grown up in the Hall of Disciples, and while they respected Feng Huiming, they were almost sheepish in front of Feng Shulan.

“Elder, what’s going on here?” The guards formed a line of raised lanterns that illuminated the three visitors. Because it was late at night and the fog was so thick, they couldn’t get a good look at their faces. All they knew was that their guests were strangers.

The Feng Clan never lacked visitors, but those who came knocking in the dead of night were few and far between. This had to have been either a life-or-death emergency or some sort of treachery. Since Feng Huiming and Feng Shulan were accompanying the three men, they were clearly not up to anything nefarious, yet the strangers also seemed untroubled by any crisis. In contrast, both Feng Huiming and Feng Shulan looked grim. The guards did not wish to make things worse for their elders, but they had rules to follow.

One guard gritted his teeth and spoke up politely. “Elder, you know the patriarch’s rules forbidding guests during the hours of introspection and self-cultivation between midnight and dawn. Since we are still in the predawn hours, we’re obliged to inform the patriarch if we must receive guests. However…”

The poor guards were caught between a rock and a hard place. Even the Feng elders were loath to disturb the patriarch at this hour. When Feng Huiming heard the guard’s words, his grim expression deepened. The mysterious young gentleman had first appeared in the Feng library well after midnight, during the hours when they supposedly did not take guests, and Feng Huiming had been forced to receive *him*!

Stone-faced, Feng Huiming put one hand behind his back and addressed the guards. “Did you hear about the Hall of Disciples receiving distress talismans?”

“I heard a little about it,” the guard said sheepishly.

"You heard and are still blocking our way?"

The guards exchanged uncertain glances. "We've been on patrol the whole time, so we didn't hear the details. All we know is that some of our initiates were in peril and that the elder and chief set out with a party to rescue them."

When the group first arrived at the estate, the guards had counted just under twenty disciples standing in neat lines behind Feng Huiming and Feng Shulan and assumed everyone had been rescued. Of course they had! The Feng Clan was equal in prominence to the Hua Clan, one of the largest cultivation clans in the world, and Feng Huiming and Feng Shulan were paragons among them. With both of them working together, nothing could have gone wrong. Wary of offending Feng Huiming, the leader of the guards chose flattery.

"My fellow disciples, thank goodness you're all safe. Your success is no surprise, of course, with our elder and the chief leading the way. No peril is too great for Feng Huiming and Feng Shulan…" As he heaped on praise, he waved one hand behind his back to signal that the other guards should hurry up and alert the patriarch.

Unfortunately, his flattery fell flat as the faces of the flattered flattened. Even the rescued disciples paled. Some looked away, some covered their faces with their hands, and others behind Feng Huiming and Feng Shulan frantically signaled with their eyes for the guard to *Shut up!*

Utterly confused, he tried to read one of the senior disciple's lips. It took a moment, but he finally managed to see what the disciple was mouthing: *"All safe" my ass*. The disciple jerked his chin toward the three

guests, then silently and emphatically continued, *The peril has followed us home. Why else would the elder look like that? Are you stupid or what?*

The guard digested this, then snapped his attention to the three visitors.

"Getting through your doors seems to be no small feat," Wu Xingxue said when he could hold his tongue no longer. His tone wasn't overtly threatening; on the contrary, he sounded measured, even elegant.

Feng Huiming, who'd experienced his pressure and temperament firsthand, braced himself.

"Young disciples are sticklers for the rules and lack the sense to be flexible when the situation calls for it," Feng Huiming said. He had no idea who Wu Xingxue was or how to address him, but the pressure he'd emitted earlier had been no less celestial that the energy emitted by the Tianxiu Immortal. Feng Huiming chose the highest form of address as a precaution. "Lord Immortal, please extend your patience."

As soon as those words passed his lips, he knew he'd made a mistake. Wu Xingxue at first seemed taken aback, then he began to laugh softly. Before the smile faded away, his expression became subdued.

Feng Huiming felt a headache coming on. In a fit of irritation, he raised his sleeve toward the disciples guarding the estate—and violently unleashed the Feng Clan's unrelenting sword force. The guards never saw it coming. The sudden force shoved the lot of them over a hundred feet, until they smashed into the spirit screen.

"Elder Huiming!" Feng Shulan called out sharply.

"Do not get in the way, Shulan. I know what I'm doing!" Feng Huiming shouted from within the whirling sword gale. He drew his sword

and struck at the air with a downward slash.

In an instant, the fog enveloping the entire city gathered at the Feng estate and engulfed the Feng disciples, including Feng Shulan. Lost within the fog, they could no longer be seen or heard. Where Feng Huiming's sword had slashed, a hundred lanterns materialized out of thin air to illuminate a path through the fog.

"This is the Feng Clan's hidden sanctuary," said Feng Huiming. "The others have never been here—not even Feng Shulan. The patriarch showed me this place when he told me about the Arbor Divinus. This is where we keep remnants of celestial traces from when the Arbor Divinus was sealed."

Wu Xingxue squinted through the thick fog. Every one of the Feng estate's stately pavilions had vanished, leaving only the hazy silhouette of a tall pagoda. Its layers of overlapping gallery corners and flying eaves were reduced to blurred lines and contours. At first glance, it resembled a tree tall enough to reach the sky. As Wu Xingxue looked at the pagoda, an uncanny sense of wrongness rose like a tidal wave and rushed toward him.

Feng Huiming intended to say more, but then his teeth started to chatter. The temperature within the entire Feng estate—no, within the entire city—had dropped in an instant. He heard a soft crackling sound underfoot and looked down to find frost forming on the ground. A chill shot from the bottom of his feet and up his spine, so cold that he shivered like his blood was about to freeze. Reeling in fear, he turned and discovered the space beside him unoccupied. A tall shadow materialized beneath the distant pagoda. It was Wu Xingxue. Next, Tianxiu's cold gaze flashed, and then there was one more figure beneath the pagoda.

Feng Huiming and Ning Huaishan remained alone on the hidden path, eyeing one another, unsure what to do next.

Ning Huaishan rubbed his arms and stamped his feet. “Shit, it’s fucking *freezing*,” he hissed. “Hey, you. Want to guess what happened the last time I saw my archon like this?”

Feng Huiming did not want to guess. He watched the two distant figures while his mind raced with schemes. He’d never carelessly allow strangers to see his clan’s secret sanctuary, whether they were divinities of Urbs Caelestia or not. The only reason he’d revealed it now was because of the nature of the sanctuary.

The patriarch had told Feng Huiming something important when he’d brought him there a long time ago:

“Fragmented traces of the Arbor Divinus still remain in this sanctuary. It takes tremendous effort to enter the pagoda, even for me. It’s impossible for outsiders to force their way in.”

“What happens if they try?”

“There won’t be anything left of them to bury.”

Feng Huiming had witnessed the truth of this with his own eyes; anyone who tried to force their way in was left with very little to bury indeed. Even celestials could not withstand such force. His plan had been to get the three intruders to this location and then trick them into an impulsive action or some minor mistake. It seemed like an expedient way to address the problem. So far, the plan had unfolded even more smoothly than he’d anticipated. Two of the strangers had rushed over on their own, no trick required, leaving just

one lowly minion. Feng Huiming held the startled look on his face and prepared to lure Ning Huaishan to the pagoda next.

Then Feng Huiming's breath caught in his throat. The two intruders were even more arrogant than he'd imagined, apparently believing they had nothing to fear simply because they were immortals.

The young man who'd interrogated Feng Huiming twice touched the pagoda's enchanted front doors.

Here we go.

A great bolt of lightning flashed across the sky above the pagoda, its stark white electricity brightening the horizon. The deafening roar of thunder sounded. With the force of a heavenly tribulation, the bolt cleaved downward, poised to strike the two immortals simultaneously. Feng Huiming automatically closed his eyes and waited for the sound of screams and explosions. When it didn't come, he opened one eye a sliver.

What he saw stunned him, enough that it would be burned into his mind for the rest of his life. As he watched, the bolt of lightning stopped in its tracks just before hitting the two immortals—then paused a moment and backtracked spectacularly whence it came. Feng Huiming looked around in confusion. Suddenly, a cavernous rumbling sound echoed from the front doors of the pagoda. The hidden sanctuary no outsiders could enter without being destroyed opened to the two intruders.

Feng Huiming's jaw dropped.

Chapter 52:
Fallen Petals

"WH-WHAT… How could this be?" Feng Huiming said incredulously. Deep creases formed on his face as he frowned. "It's impossible. It's not right… This can't be right!"

Ning Huaishan had been about to follow Wu Xingxue, but he changed his mind when he saw Feng Huiming's shock.

"Is it really so surprising?" Ning Huaishan took a few steps backward and narrowed his eyes to observe Feng Huiming's demeanor. "Could it be that there's some sort of key to this sanctuary of yours? Yeah, there must be something like that, otherwise it wouldn't be much of a sanctuary. But still, the look on your face makes me think…"

Ning Huaishan licked one of his pointed canines and threw an arm over Feng Huiming's shoulder. On the face of it, the gesture looked friendly, but Ning Huaishan had curled his fingers into claws that brushed Feng Huiming's throat. Ning Huaishan's vital force was nowhere near as intense as his archon's, but the tips of his fingers were blue-black, a clear sign that he was a master of poison arts. Every strand of his hair could become venomous if he so chose.

"Why, you…!" Feng Huiming turned his sword hand out to strike but stiffened the second he saw those blue-black fingers.

Under ordinary circumstances, there was no way Ning Huaishan could have grabbed Feng Huiming so easily, but Feng Huiming's moment of paralyzed surprise had left him wide open.

Arm still wrapped chummily around Feng Huiming's neck, Ning Huaishan taunted him like the little thug he was.

"Eh, Elder? Care to explain why you're so shocked? I just can't figure it out. See, I assumed that lightning bolt was a ward your clan set in place to protect the sanctuary, but judging by the look on your face, it seems like something else entirely. After all, it shouldn't be *that* surprising that the archon could break through, not to mention…" Ning Huaishan paused. He may not have liked celestials, but for the sake of asserting his dominance, he continued, "the Tianxiu Immortal."

Ning Huaishan crooked his elbow further, forcing Feng Huiming to lower his head. "It almost seems like you were expecting the lightning to strike them down with a single hit? Does that sound about right?"

With his questioning concluded, Ning Huaishan pushed off from the ground.

Crack, crack, crack—

Fissures spread along the gray flagstones of the Feng estate. The next instant, Feng Huiming still restrained, Ning Huaishan jumped hundreds of feet. Stone shattered in his wake as he dragged Feng Huiming into the tall pagoda and tossed him in front of Wu Xingxue and Xiao Fuxuan.

"Archon, this guy's trying to kill you!" Ning Huaishan tattled. "I caught him red-handed!"

"Ah." Wu Xingxue looked at Feng Huiming. "No wonder you were so accommodating." If nothing else, Feng Huiming was a respected elder of the Feng Clan. It would've been more surprising if he'd divulged the clan's

secrets after such a short interrogation and brought them back *without* an ambush.

There was little emotion on Wu Xingxue's face, which Ning Huaishan knew meant his archon was in a terrible mood. Feng Huiming could feel it as well and tried to plead his case.

"It's not true! I just never expected you two to be in such a hurry that you'd enter without waiting for me to clear the way first."

Ning Huaishan sneered, not believing a word.

Feng Huiming was still mired in disbelief—a giant lightning bolt backtracking into the heavens was unprecedented enough, never mind the sanctuary opening its own doors. He fixed an intense stare on Wu Xingxue. "Who are you? Which celestial of Urbs Caelestia are you, anyway?"

He knew who Xiao Fuxuan was, and even the Tianxiu Immortal should not have received such special treatment from the sanctuary. The only unknown here was the mysterious young man. A vague notion crossed his mind, but before he could complete the thought, Wu Xingxue was already replying.

"Me? When did I ever claim to be a celestial?"

His response alarmed Feng Huiming, sending his half-formed notions up in smoke. He finally sensed the infernal energy pouring from Wu Xingxue, far stronger than the energy of any fiend he'd ever encountered. Feng Huiming gaped at the figures before him and said nothing.

Wu Xingxue did not address Feng Huiming again. His gaze settled beyond the pagoda's open doors. The uncanny sense of wrongness Wu Xingxue had felt earlier had intensified. He recognized, suddenly, the disquiet

of witnessing the familiar woven together with the strange. He was intimately aware of something in this place, something bound to him by his every vein. But whatever it was, the thing had become totally alien.

The pagoda's towering black doors were massive and heavy, like two solid pieces of starmetal. The interior furnishings were ordinary: an altar and two round woven straw cushions for meditation. Candles hung high in the corners, their flames tinged deep red as they swayed in the breeze, filling the pagoda with shifting shadows. The light, which should have been reassuring, set one's teeth on edge.

Ning Huaishan pulled on his collar. "This damn place gives me the creeps," he mumbled with a long face.

The candles emitted a faint scent as they burned. It wasn't bad—in fact, it was rather pleasant—but more than a single whiff made one feel lightheaded and woozy. As Ning Huaishan turned and fanned the air in front of his face, he felt a bout of dizziness.

"What sort of candles are these?!" Ning Huaishan demanded of Feng Huiming with a kick. "The smell makes me sick to my stomach!"

Feng Huiming pursed his lips and did not look up.

"I asked you a question!" Ning Huaishan growled.

Feng Huiming gritted his teeth. "They're just medicinal candles. They're not bad for you."

Feng Huiming's mind was a tangled mess. He had counted on all three of the intruders dying in front of the pagoda. Not only had *that* plan failed spectacularly, they'd passed right through the pagoda's front doors without breaking a sweat. He no longer knew what he was doing. He'd let the foxes

into the henhouse—and two of the foxes were fiends. He was certain the clan guards had reported everything to the patriarch by now, so it wouldn't be long before he rushed over. Feng Huiming had to come up with a way to eliminate these three before the patriarch arrived and suspected him of being a traitor to the Feng Clan.

"Medicinal candles? Why would you put medicine in perfectly good candles?" Ning Huaishan asked, kicking Feng Huiming again.

Feng Huiming put on a show of swallowing his pride. "Because there's a need for it."

"Hmph. You better not be trying to put one over on us." Ning Huaishan experienced a twinge of remorse and wished he hadn't smooth-talked Yi Wusheng into leaving.

Ning Huaishan may have been an expert in poisons, but Yi Wusheng was esteemed for his medicinal knowledge, which would have been more useful at the moment. He probably could have identified the medicine in the candles with one whiff. Ning Huaishan, meanwhile, looked like there was something wrong with his brain whenever he tried to test medicine.

With a resigned sigh, Ning Huaishan stuck his head into the pagoda like a dolt. He took several deep breaths, doing everything short of standing on tiptoe to get closer to the candles.

Wu Xingxue had never before seen his underling act like this and was left with many questions. Before he could voice them, Ning Huaishan pulled back and stared as the blue-black coloring faded from his fingertips.

"Archon, it's not poisoned. It won't kill you."

For those from Nightgleam, poison was only poison if it was deadly right away. If it didn't kill, it didn't count as poison—it was a little gimmick that negatively affected one's performance at worst.

"Of course they're not poisoned," Feng Huiming said. "We're cultivators. Why would we poison our own candles, to poison ourselves? The people who know about this place can be counted on one hand."

Feng Huiming was well-versed in certain principles of interrogation. If he implied these candles were perfectly harmless, anyone with half a brain would know he was lying. But if he seemed too eager to admit they were dangerous, they'd assume he was holding something back to use against them later. It would be better to let them coax more information out of him. They'd believe whatever he told them then.

"Oh," grumbled Ning Huaishan. "Why is your clan so dumb? If this is a sanctuary, why are the doors wide open? Why aren't there any defenses?"

Feigning embarrassment, Feng Huiming paused for a while before begrudgingly revealing some vague details. "It really isn't poison, not exactly. At most, the candles make anyone who barges in here feel a little confused…"

"Just a little confused? Sure doesn't seem like it," said Wu Xingxue as he rubbed two fingers together. Whenever he'd wanted to kill before, all the vital force in his body had coalesced in his palm. It was an innate shift. Now, though he'd circulated his vital force through his body twice, it still wouldn't gather in his fingers. It just sifted like dry sand between them.

Feng Huiming noticed the way Wu Xingxue's fingers were moving, then stole a glance at Xiao Fuxuan as well.

Aside from muddling the brain, the candles' main effect was to weaken vital energy. So what if the trespasser was a celestial with an aura as mighty as the ocean? If he couldn't gather his vital force, he was no better than mortal cultivators. Just as Feng Huiming hoped, the Tianxiu Immortal's brows were drawn together in confusion.

It is done! Feng Huiming thought with a surge of delight. Though the immortal had said nothing, Feng Huiming was certain the medicinal candles were working.

Still, the candles only affected their vital force and weakened their aura. With three of them against just one of him, Feng Huiming remained at a disadvantage. Being outnumbered was a principle anyone would appreciate—and Feng Huiming was counting on the fact that "anyone" included the three intruders. As long as they no longer perceived him as a threat, they would enter the pagoda. Once they were inside, the rest would be easy.

Within the pagoda sanctuary, the floors he and the patriarch frequented most were the first and second. These two floors borrowed the Arbor Divinus's residual power, the cycles of life and death that allowed the tree to thrive and decay in equal measure. The first floor was the level of thriving, associated with the blazing sun. Ordinary people could not bear its heat, so when they entered they quickly found themselves drenched in sweat and their minds in turmoil. Overstaying led to extreme swelling in the meridians and could induce them to burst, which caused instant death. The second floor was the level of decay, associated with the bone-chilling cold of the moon. Overstaying on that floor caused ordinary people's meridians to shrink and freeze. After that, their vital force could never circulate through their bodies again.

For cultivators, a momentary lapse in concentration could disrupt the flow of vital force and send it in the wrong direction, leading to energy deviation or worse. Sometimes, it flowed toward extreme cold, and toward extreme heat at others. The greater one's level of mastery, the more difficult it was to regain control when such deviations occurred. During such times, these two levels became the ideal place for isolated cultivation. Across all the generations of Fengs, those who'd needed to cultivate using the powers of thriving or decaying were rarer than phoenix feathers. The only such cultivator from the previous generation was the patriarch, and Feng Huiming was the only one from his.

Every time they visited the pagoda, they placed a special spirit-shield pill under their tongues. The pill cancelled out half of the sacred force that dwelled within the pagoda, allowing them to withstand it. Anyone who entered the pagoda without it, even Feng Shulan, was certain to meet a gruesome end.

Feng Huiming was counting on it.

The three visitors were struggling to coalesce their vital force. Their auras were gone. Now, they were no different from mortal cultivators. Whether they were equal in strength to the patriarch or stronger, they would die without a spirit-shield pill. Anticipation consumed Feng Huiming.

"The sanctuary is acting rather unusual today," Feng Huiming said innocently. *Breaking all precedent and clearing the way for fiends, for instance*. "As such, even I cannot guarantee whether we might meet with unforeseen dangers once we're inside." Having given a veiled warning, he continued, "If you three gentlemen would still like to go in and look around, please take these spirit-shield pills made by our clan."

Feng Huiming did not omit a single word he was meant to say, fulfilling his moral responsibility to the fullest. He took three golden pills from the silk pouch hanging from his belt and extended his palm to them. He knew full well that they wouldn't take them; in their position, he wouldn't take them either. Who in their right mind would accept some unknown pill from a man whose words mixed truths and lies?

Sure enough, Ning Huaishan looked disdainfully at the gold pill. "I'm not taking that. What am I supposed to do if it turns out to be poison?"

"No need," the Tianxiu Immortal said coldly.

"You go ahead and take your time," Wu Xingxue said dismissively. He stepped over the threshold into the pagoda.

Feng Huiming hid the hand holding the pills behind his back and sneered inwardly. *Good advice is wasted on such obstinate soon-to-be ghosts. Celestial or fiend, blindly defying taboos has consequences!*

When no one was looking his way, he placed a pill under his tongue and followed Xiao Fuxuan into the pagoda.

With a great rumble, the giant black iron doors closed behind them. The candlelight flickered. The blazing power of the sun that sprang from the Arbor Divinus spun like a vortex in the deep sea. Even with the spirit-shielding pill beneath his tongue, Feng Huiming's heart palpitated. He pressed his tongue against the tiny pill the way a drowning man clings to a life-saving log. He knew that without the pill, he would be drawn into that vortex of force, unable to spare himself a violent death from the eruption of his meridians.

Ning Huaishan wiped at his temple. "It's getting hotter and hotter.

Sweat's dripping off me."

Feng Huiming stared at their backs icily. *You're damned right it's hot. If you're starting to sweat, then you'll be dead by the time I count to ten. One, two, three…*

Feng Huiming paused. He heard a sound like the roaring of an invisible tide rushing in from somewhere else. He listened carefully to determine its origin, then looked up. The "tide" seemed to be coming from…upstairs?

The first level's blazing sun came from the thriving form of the Arbor Divinus. The cold moonlight of the second level came from the decaying form of the Arbor Divinus. The tide sounded as though the force of the cold moon upstairs had already activated.

How's that possible? We're still on the first level, so why would the second be active?

Feng Huiming listened to the sacred force crash down from above.

Boom!

The ceiling of the first level collapsed, creating a huge opening.

"Fu—" Feng Huiming almost swore.

He was bursting with questions. This pagoda sanctuary had existed in the Feng Clan for generations! Had he somehow just blown a huge hole in it?! It all seemed beyond far-fetched. And that wasn't the end of it. The cold moon forces confined to the second level plunged through the new opening. Wrapped in a steel-blue mist, they collided with the first level's sun force and melded together.

Mountains roared, oceans howled, and the world turned upside down. Feng Huiming felt the pill beneath his tongue shatter into pieces. A sour,

bitter taste emanated from the root of his tongue, so frigid it made his heart shiver. A sharp buzz rang through his head as he accepted that the day of his death had come. Soon, he would be buried with these three.

The sacred force built upon itself, louder and louder, until it rushed toward Wu Xingxue with a resonant roar.

He'll be the first to die today, Feng Huiming thought. He took two steps back to avoid being drenched in blood when Wu Xingxue's body erupted.

Instead, as the sacred force surged forward and touched the archfiend, it transformed into graceful coils.

It was like a raging waterfall leaping from a mountain's peak becoming a gentle, burbling stream as it descended into a rocky basin narrowed by the valley. The now-delicate surge slipped almost subserviently into Wu Xingxue's veins, which neither bulged from his skin nor ruptured. If anything, his pallor improved.

Feng Huiming watched and said nothing, his century-long worldview in shambles. Either he or this pagoda had gone mad. By the time he recovered from his shock, he realized he was gaping with wide eyes from the corner of the room.

Wu Xingxue accepted every last strand of sacred force, then looked down at his hands. He nodded at Xiao Fuxuan. "How're you feeling? Did it affect you? I think some of it flowed into you through your vital force."

Feng Huiming was still lost at sea. He could not comprehend how one person could take on the residual powers of the Arbor Divinus, let alone how such powers could be channeled into that person's body. Even if the archfiend was endowed with an exceptional body that would not rupture at the Arbor

Divinus's touch, that wouldn't protect anyone else. Nonetheless, not only had Xiao Fuxuan's veins not ruptured, he'd recovered the vital force diluted by the medicinal candles too!

As the Tianxiu Immortal flexed his fingers, his oppressive aura fell upon them like Mount Tai crumbling. It landed with a thud and sent a shudder through the entire pagoda.

Feng Huiming slid a few inches toward the floor.

While Feng Huiming slipped ever closer to madness, Wu Xingxue felt a strange sense of nostalgia from the sacred force flowing through his body. He had once abandoned this part of himself in a place unknown but had now reclaimed it. Though the power was unchanged, *he* was no longer the same. His veins did not burst on contact with the sacred power, but it did not integrate into him very well either. He was filled to the brim with vital force, but it made him feel even colder, like an extreme version of his tribulation period. Wu Xingxue became a contradiction—his face regained some color, but his fingers went so pale they were almost blue.

There was an instant where his bones felt soaked in ice water. The extreme cold numbed all five of his senses. He could hear and see almost nothing; the candles became little more than distant bright points in a field of black, like stars in the night sky. Still, Wu Xingxue's expression never changed, and he appeared as unflappable as ever. To Feng Huiming and Ning Huaishan, he might have appeared to be near his peak.

He called out using the Tianxiu Immortal's vital force link. *‹Xiao Fuxuan.›*

‹Hm?›

The voice echoing within Wu Xingxue's heart was the most distinct sound he could hear. His five senses had diminished, but he could still sense Xiao Fuxuan's presence.

‹The Feng Clan said there were remnants of the Arbor Divinus here, but I don't believe just remnants could possess so much sacred force,› Wu Xingxue said evenly, despite his weakened state. *‹There must be something else here, something more, something like…›* He blinked, pondering the ever-expanding gloom and silence. *‹Like a leftover branch or something like that. Can you sense it?›*

‹I can try,› replied Xiao Fuxuan.

He scanned the area. A portion of the Arbor Divinus's force had also integrated with his own. Ordinarily, divine forces would repel one another, but for whatever reason, that trace amount of force was so in harmony with Xiao Fuxuan that it soothed him.

He carefully felt for traces of the Arbor Divinus as he searched. Soon, he furrowed his brow. If a leftover branch were hidden in the pagoda, the traces of the Arbor Divinus would be far stronger there than anywhere else. Xiao Fuxuan was unable to find any one place where it was strongest. Instead, there was no difference in strength no matter where he looked. As he mulled this over, Xiao Fuxuan raised his eyes to the gaping hole overhead. He could see the ceiling of the second level, and beyond it, the third level.

The third level… Xiao Fuxuan thought about it for a moment, then lifted his hand and threw his sword aura in that direction. As the golden light went through the giant hole, there was another loud boom. Again, the pagoda quaked.

Split wooden planks and slivers of wood fell like hail, driving Feng Huiming lower to the floor. He stared fearfully at the ceiling, swallowed, and cried out, “You mustn’t!”

Xiao Fuxuan’s fingers remained up as he shot a glance back at Feng Huiming. From the look on his face, he seemed entirely out of patience.

“You really can’t do that!” Feng Huiming shouted. “You mustn’t touch the second-floor ceiling. The third floor is out of bounds!” He spoke the truth, far too afraid to have the wherewithal to lie.

“Why is it out of bounds?” asked Xiao Fuxuan.

“Everything above the second level is forbidden. We’ll *die*!” Feng Huiming insisted.

The third level of the pagoda was a forbidden domain where even he dared not go. It was said that fragmented traces of the Arbor Divinus were sealed within, he rushed to explain.

Once, the patriarch had taken Feng Huiming along to serve as a guard as he’d visited the third floor of the pagoda.

Standing on guard, Feng Huiming heard some bizarre voices drifting from above. Driven by powerful curiosity and overconfidence in his abilities, he snuck up the stairs to see what was going on.

From the second-floor stairs, he reached out to push open the door to the third level. Suddenly, some hair tickled his neck. At first, he assumed it was just his own, but he’d worn it in a bun that day to keep it out of his face. There was no way his hair could be brushing the back of his neck. He turned to look and was surprised to find that it was indeed a lock of hair…a lock of someone else’s long hair hanging down from above.

He flinched with surprise and lifted his head.

From the outside, the pagoda sanctuary appeared to have many levels, no different from an ordinary pagoda. But inside, one could see it wasn't so. Instead, the third level went all the way to the top, with no floors above it. To Feng Huiming, it looked as if the pagoda went on forever, and darkness overhead slanted downward, following its shape. His body grew taut with tension. He rubbed his palm to create a ball of fire that he shone into the darkness above him.

Pale branches as white as bleached bones poked through the gap at the top of the tall door. Entangled and knotted, they stretched down from the pagoda's high roof, crisscrossing like a net around many vague silhouettes. He looked closer and saw that the net was full of corpses. The lock of hair that had been tickling the back of his neck hung down from one of the bodies.

A bolt of fear chilled his heart and locked him in place. He looked down to discover his chest heaving. Blood had begun to spread from where something had pierced the fabric—a white branch, reaching out from his body like a tree sprouting new growth.

"That is the price for stealing a glance at the Arbor Divinus," the patriarch had told Feng Huiming.

He had always believed he'd almost died that day inside that pagoda. He hoped to never again experience the chill that had seized him so ferociously it had halted his blood.

Xiao Fuxuan watched Feng Huiming with cold eyes as he related the whole story. Then, after a long pause, he said dispassionately, "What a bunch of nonsense."

Feng Huiming sputtered and tried to think of what else to say to convince Xiao Fuxuan. But Xiao Fuxuan didn't wait to hear more. With a snap of his scabbard, he sent a myriad of golden rays throughout the pagoda. It lit up as bright as day.

Feng Huiming tilted his head toward the sky. *It is finished. The pagoda will come down.*

Amid the cacophony of splintering wood and quaking walls, he heard a voice. The same voice followed Xiao Fuxuan's vital force to resonate clear and deep next to Wu Xingxue's heart.

"From the very start, the Arbor Divinus grew on the peak of a mountain range. Its fallen petals covered the land for four miles around. Many saw it with their own eyes, and none had to pay a price for looking at it. This so-called price is nothing but a punishment invented by mortals."

As his words resounded, the entire second floor fell to ruin. The pagoda seemed on the verge of collapse. Feng Huiming gazed up at the third level he'd never again dared to spy upon, only to find it as hollow as a deep cavern. Other than smoke, dust, and a musty breeze tinged with the odor of decay, it was empty. There was nothing there—no so-called fragments of the Arbor Divinus nor anything related to the Arbor Divinus at all.

Feng Huiming's initial shock was washed away by a wave of absurdity that nearly drowned him. Had an empty pagoda fooled him for a hundred years? That couldn't be right—if it was truly empty, what was the source of the first and second levels' sacred forces?

The Tianxiu Immortal's expression darkened as though something had just occurred to him. He curled his fingers into a fist, and the sword intent he'd sent out earlier bloomed.

A chorus of groaning, snapping, splintering wood rang out from the pagoda's round pillars and beams. The intricately carved beams exploded one after another under the force of Xiao Fuxuan's sword intent until they crumbled to the floor. Once they'd disintegrated, Feng Huiming saw what Tianxiu's show of force had revealed: The columns were hollow, mere facades over the branches embedded within—branches wrapped in jadehaem.

No wonder I felt the presence of the Arbor Divinus everywhere, thought Xiao Fuxuan. All this time, it had been kept hidden within the pagoda.

To be precise, someone had built this pagoda using its broken branches. The instant the jadehaem-encased branches fell to the dusty floor, an all-encompassing phantom appeared. It was a towering tree, so tall it was impossible to see the top, its canopy as sweeping as the clouds and its branches aglow as if lit by the setting sun. Countless petals fluttered down, light and free, like snowfall on a midwinter day.

Wu Xingxue stood beneath the image in a rain of petals. He still could not see nor hear nor feel, but as the image enveloped him, memories flashed through his mind.

Chapter 53:
What He Presided Over

IT HAD BEEN FAR, far too long since Wu Xingxue stood beneath the Arbor Divinus like this.

The last time was the year the Arbor Divinus reached its fullest bloom, when it was most intricately entwined with the mortal realm. There had always been those who attempted to exploit the Arbor Divinus's powers. Snippets of such claims circulated sporadically over time and became legends that held kernels of truth. The legends were like flames beneath a sheet of paper, obscured and diffuse until they blazed to the surface, spreading in an instant.

That year, the legends spread to the four corners of the world overnight. Lured by the rumors, far too many people flocked to Blossomfell Terrace. Some masked their true intentions behind other business while others cited noble rationales. They used a plethora of methods to harness the Arbor Divinus's powers to fulfill their wishes and dreams.

Many of their individual desires were fundamentally at odds with one another's. Some wished for the capital city's eternal prosperity while others wished for its swift annihilation; some despised a person and prayed for their death while others loved that person and prayed for their survival. No matter the object of their hatred or hope, the desires of those entangled with the Arbor Divinus's fate were often diametrically opposed.

The collision of these opposing wishes led to contradictions that could only backfire. Ultimately, no single person came out on top, and as people

grew increasingly remorseful, they used every method they could think of to return to the past, attempting in vain to sever certain connections or change destiny itself. This only made things worse. Causality begat causality, and the total number of mortal realms multiplied. It was as if a single pristine bough had suddenly sprouted many fine branches, each one not simply growing on its own but instead crisscrossing and tangling with the others.

A tale of wraithlings had once circulated the area now known as Twilight Fen. It told of two orphaned brothers who lost both of their parents and relied on one another to survive. Their wandering eventually led them to the capital of a small southern nation. While seeking food and shelter, they often found discarded letters and pages torn from books, and using these scraps, they taught themselves to read. By chance, they were taken in and survived their difficult childhood. As adults, they both entered the service of the national government. After spending the early part of their lives in hardship, they settled down and never faced such suffering again. The brothers' tale was a straightforward, peaceful one, hardly worth passing along but for the unexpected turn it took later.

Elsewhere, there was a cultivator who'd strayed from the rightful path. Before his tragic demise, his discontent led him to risk everything on an arcane formation that could draw on the power of the Arbor Divinus to send him decades back in time. This was like tossing a stone that disturbed an entire calm pond. The arcane formation spawned several more branching realities and sowed chaos in the once-peaceful world. The innocent were swept up in this unforeseen calamity, their fates rewritten. The brothers were among them. This time, they did not live to reach the capital city. They died just a third of a mile from its gates.

At the time of their deaths, they were still children—short, shoeless, dressed in rags, and emaciated from hunger. They died behind a crumbling wall; perhaps they took shelter there when they could walk no longer, hoping to block the wind enough to get a good night's sleep. The bigger brother used his own body to keep the younger one sheltered close to the wall. Once they fell asleep, they never woke again. The small nation-state lost two young foreign visitors, and the heartwarming tale of their joint acceptance into the civil service went untold.

Meanwhile, the stretch of wilderness outside the city gates gained two oblivious new souls. The bigger one carried the smaller one on his back, walking back and forth along the road to the capital but unable to enter. Most who encountered the two ghosts fled in terror at the sight, but one kind person took pity on them. He tried to offer them deliverance but was not successful, because they never should have died in the first place.

There were many others like the cultivator whose arcane formation wreaked such havoc, and there were equally as many like the wraithlings. If one person trying to escape their regrets could create so many branching timelines, imagine how many a hundred people might create, let alone a thousand or more. Every day the Arbor Divinus remained accessible, the web of splintering timelines multiplied, and the mortal realm slipped further into chaos.

Thus, when the canopy was in its fullest bloom, the Arbor Divinus reached the end of its road.

According to legend, the Arbor Divinus connected the heavens above with the earth below and represented the cycle of rebirth. Having taken in so many mortal joys, sorrows, and prayers, it had developed a human aspect. In

that final year, the Arbor Divinus's cycle of rebirth separated and assimilated into the heavens, where it became the Heavenly Principles. Then, its human aspect was conferred the name Zhao and became the very first celestial. The very last thing Zhao did before becoming Rex Spiritus was seal away what remained of the Arbor Divinus.

As it turned out, the Feng Clan had been correct—from the start, Wu Xingxue had erected the borders around the forbidden domain with his own two hands.

On that day, just as before, he stood on Blossomfell Terrace. He leaned lazily against a branch of the Arbor Divinus, his arms crossed and his gaze cast down over the mortals who came and went along the mountain path. He heard the shop clerks and tavern hawkers loudly promoting their goods to the crowd, their words and tones blending into the song of the marketplace.

The heat and smoke of street life rose from the bazaar's many hearths and settled as a pale swirling fog in the mountains' valleys. He watched, the towering tree standing quietly behind him like an infinitely tall shadow, until the fog engulfed the mountains and its paths were no longer visible.

Finally, he said with a sigh, "The bazaar sure is lovely to look at. It's too bad I won't see it all the time anymore."

He turned around and studied the Arbor Divinus's lush, billowing canopy. Amid the rain of petals that blanketed Blossomfell Terrace, he could feel the constant blossoming of new flowers on the tree's branches and the ceaseless withering of dead blooms carried off in the breeze. He could feel every branch, every petal, every cycle of life and rebirth—and he also felt a touch of regret. He broke off one long branch and used it to draw lines on the ground encircling the Arbor Divinus and its temple. Having demarcated the

domain's borders, he placed the arcane formations one by one: wind, frost, lightning, and fire; sabers, swords, and instruments of war.

The Arbor Divinus trembled as if each formation was a giant invisible chain wrapped around its limbs. The tips of its branches began to turn ashen gray, a sign of its withering. Just as he could sense each of the tree's flowers, Wu Xingxue could feel every injury the Arbor Divinus suffered, every chain added. When the Arbor Divinus withered, so did he. What he was experiencing was known to mortals as the waning of the five senses. He could not see, hear, or feel. It was as if he was adrift in a sea of boundless solitude.

The sealing process took a long time—far longer than he had expected. Throughout, whenever the Arbor Divinus showed any sign of withering, the white jadehaem covering the ground wrapped around its trunk. Each time this happened, Wu Xingxue recovered his senses just enough to make out the glimmer of pristine white jade.

In that color, he could hear the young general's voice asking him, *Does it hurt a lot?* He listened but did not reply; he knew he wasn't actually hearing those words. It was just the jadehaem reminding him of the young general all those years ago, the bygone voice somehow the only presence within endless darkness. He heard the words over and over until, much later, the voice rang out again.

"Does it hurt a lot?"

Wu Xingxue remained silent a long while before he responded.

"It's all right. It can hardly be compared to heavenly tribulations. This is more like a scratch from a bug's leg." After all, as his senses waned, he

could no longer perceive real pain. All he sensed was a subconscious discomfort, and that was nothing more than an illusion.

By the time he placed the final restrictive ward to conceal the Arbor Divinus, it was the third day. When the Arbor Divinus was fully withered, jadehaem completely encased its trunk and branches. It even enveloped the long branch Wu Xingxue had broken off and held in his hand. Unfortunately, Wu Xingxue did not witness this spectacle.

Once the final seal was in place, the blood ties between Wu Xingxue and the Arbor Divinus were entirely severed. He no longer shared its senses and awareness, but some of the seal's aftereffects remained, and for a long time afterward, he existed in a state of complete sensory loss.

He was the first celestial of Urbs Caelestia. He came from the Arbor Divinus, had perceived the cycle of rebirth, and bore the spirit of heaven, so the title "Rex Spiritus" was bestowed on him. And because he had spent a century gazing down on mortal life, he preferred lively environments filled with the clamor of human conversation. Rex Spiritus, who loved vibrant places, sat alone in darkness and silence for three years—three full cycles of the four seasons.

The day his senses recovered coincided with the Third Month in the mortal realm. Apricot blossoms were in full bloom, and the soothing warmth of early spring drifted up to Urbs Caelestia with the clouds. When Rex Spiritus opened his eyes, he saw petals falling at an angle to gather in a small pile on his windowsill. His mood greatly improved. He looked at the blank lintel above the gates and felt inspired to give the place a name, but the springtime sunlight by the window was so wonderful he lingered there, leaning lazily against the sill and holding a knee to his chest.

He did not wish to rise from the bed, so he scanned the room for something he could use. Finally, he saw it—a long branch by the bed. It was the same branch he'd snapped off to draw the circle around the Arbor Divinus, that much he remembered, but it looked different now, encased in a jade-white luster. He stared at it for a long time before understanding what had happened. He picked it up with a wry smile. In his hand, the jade-colored branch turned in a beautiful arc and transformed into a long sword that gleamed with spiritual light.

The windows of jade pavilions were expansive things that fluttered with sheer curtains like veils of mist. That day, celestial emissaries passing by saw Rex Spiritus step onto the layers of fallen petals lining his windowsill, lift the curtains, and fly over the eaves to settle gracefully on their edges. With a grin, he turned the long sword in his hand and inscribed four words on his jade pavilion's horizontal plaque: *Seat of Spring Breeze*. As he pulled back his sword, the wind swept the petals from the windowsill and scattered them over his head in a gentle cascade. The celestial emissaries who witnessed that moment remembered it as a fleeting glimpse of unparalleled beauty.

During the three years Rex Spiritus sat in quiet meditation, Urbs Caelestia flourished. The Heavenly Principles gave rise to the Spirit Terrace, and one by one, mortal cultivators reached apotheosis. Five of the Twelve Immortals of the Spirit Terrace were already in place. The prayers and offerings formerly dedicated to the Arbor Divinus had gradually dissipated after its sealing and were now directed toward the Spirit Terrace's many celestials.

Each celestial held different responsibilities and attended to their own tasks. The myriad prayers seemed orderly as they were dispersed to the appropriate celestial. However, that orderliness only applied to others; for Rex Spiritus, the world had never been orderly.

Over time, the residents of Urbs Caelestia grew curious. They knew that Xiao Fuxuan was the numen of penance, and they knew the duties of all the other celestials who conferred blessings to the mortal realm, but no one could say what Rex Spiritus presided over. Driven by overwhelming curiosity tinged with admiration, some tried to trail him down to the mortal realm to see what he did when he wasn't in Urbs Caelestia. They always returned empty-handed, for there would invariably come a moment when Rex Spiritus vanished without warning, leaving no trace.

This was not the common art of obfuscation. As fellow celestials, they would have known if Rex Spiritus had merely cloaked his presence. They had no other explanation for the way he vanished, so it remained an enigma. Rex Spiritus received his heavenly edicts directly, and because the will of the heavens must never be divulged, only he would ever know the answer.

What he knew was this: Each time he accepted a heavenly edict and descended to the mortal realm, it was to sever a branching timeline. Those who tried in vain to turn back time and begin anew dragged everything back to the past and revised fate, which caused no end of chaos. Branch after branch would split into fine twigs, each intertwining with the other. Those fated to live might die, and those fated to perish might survive. Life and death became disordered and disrupted the passage of time.

It was Rex Spiritus's job to prune these tangled branches. He restored order, righting disrupted sequences of causality; he healed those not meant to

die and killed those not meant to live.

The celestial host was extensive, and most appeared compassionate and gentle as they either bestowed blessings or provided protection. Even Xiao Fuxuan only used his sword to cut down fiends.

Among celestials, Rex Spiritus alone killed people.

Chapter 54:
Pageboy

EVERYONE IN URBS CAELESTIA said Rex Spiritus smiled a lot. Some of his smiles were barely there, hanging lazily at the corners of his eyes while his pupils sparkled like stars. Others were radiant and indulgent, perfectly suited to the name of his residence. His position in Urbs Caelestia was singular, yet he never put on airs. He was neither distant nor formal, no matter who approached him; instead, he was playful and quick with a joke, a jab, or a wink. He should have seemed approachable, but strangely, even those who admired him most did not dare to get close to him. Perhaps the enduring mystery of his celestial domain created the gap.

Every jade pavilion had celestial emissaries and pageboys who served as attendants and helped manage daily affairs. Only Rex Spiritus remained the exception. He clearly enjoyed a vibrant atmosphere, but in the beginning, not a single emissary or pageboy shared the expansive grounds of the Seat of Spring Breeze.

In Urbs Caelestia, there was a commission in charge of day-to-day trivialities: the Rites Bureau. Two officials were responsible for running this bureau. One was Meng Gu, notorious throughout Urbs Caelestia for her fiery disposition. At the slightest provocation, one was liable to be flicked with her dust whisk and ordered as far away from her as possible. The other was Sang Feng. He was a chronic worrywart, tall and handsome with a hawk's sharp features. He was most keen in the role of older brother, steward, or father. It

seemed he had taken care of people pre-apotheosis and found it hard to change his nature after ascending to Urbs Caelestia.

One day, Sang Feng's worries got the better of him, and he could no longer bear to be kept in the dark. He staked out the Seat of Spring Breeze for seven days and nights until he "chanced" upon Rex Spiritus returning from the mortal realm. As soon as Sang Feng saw him, he struck a deep bow that gave Rex Spiritus quite a scare.

"Eh? I can't possibly accept such a grand gesture." Rex Spiritus sidestepped out of the way, grabbed one of Sang Feng's own pageboys, and used him as a shield to accept the rite.

The pageboy was rather speechless—almost as speechless as Sang Feng.

"If you have something to say, please just go right ahead," said Rex Spiritus, his hand resting on the pageboy's head. "No need to bend at the waist." He wore his usual mask, so his words were a bit muffled.

"Um…" Sang Feng stared at the silver-filigreed mask and faltered a little. A masked Rex Spiritus was always more mysterious, even when joking around. Rex Spiritus seemed to notice and lifted the mask higher on his face.

Sang Feng relaxed. He took the pageboy back from Rex Spiritus and spoke in a patient, ingratiating voice. "It's nothing serious, it's just… My lord, please accept a few emissaries and pageboys from us."

Rex Spiritus curled the corners of his mouth into a smile before he flattened them again. "Don't want them."

"But…it's considered routine minutiae and thus falls under our jurisdiction. The Rites Bureau had a few prepared for you many moons ago,

and they've been standing around ever since. Please just take them."

"I've already told you that I don't want any." Rex Spiritus was amiable, but he was also difficult to sway. "I'm not even here at the Seat of Spring Breeze all the time, anyway. What am I supposed to do with emissaries and pageboys?"

"All the other celestials have them, my lord, and this place of yours is the only one that's empty," Sang Feng persisted. "It makes me anxious just looking at it."

Rex Spiritus was not like Sang Feng and thus could not fathom why someone else would care that his official residence was empty. "Every celestial has one? Really? There's not a single one that didn't want any?" he asked with a smile. "I don't believe you."

After a moment of silence, Sang Feng said, "Oh, fine. Tianxiu won't take any either."

Rex Spiritus lifted an eyebrow.

"But that's just the kind of person Tianxiu is!" Sang Feng said in a rush to gloss over the admission.

"What kind is that?"

Sang Feng pondered for a moment. "Well, to paraphrase Meng Gu, any emissaries or pageboys we sent his way would freeze to death within two days."

Wu Xingxue wondered about this. After he'd opened his eyes for the first time in the Seat of Spring Breeze, he'd heard about the Heavenly Principles invoking another immortal. Bestowed the name Mian, his title was Tianxiu. But Rex Spiritus had no real interest in whether Urbs Caelestia got

itself another celestial or not, and although he could chat with just about anyone, he was never the type to drop in on others at their official residences. He supposed Tianxiu wasn't so keen on making new friends either. Plus, they were both busy attending to their official duties. In more than half a year, Rex Spiritus had never once run into him.

Still, every time Rex Spiritus returned to Urbs Caelestia, he overheard Tianxiu's title in snippets of conversation. Each mention was accompanied by phrases like "that's just the kind of person he is," "that's just something he would do," and other such vague disclaimers.

He'd heard it too many times to ignore it, but though he was curious, that curiosity was still limited. He'd just returned from his duties eradicating a twisted timeline, and the work had left him sluggish. He wanted to rest. Nonetheless, the curled corners of his mouth were deceiving, and Sang Feng couldn't tell how tired he was at all.

"Well, enough about that," Sang Feng said. "I heard you prefer a lively atmosphere, my lord, so why is your residence so bleak? Are you…perhaps *concerned* that the emissaries and pageboys would be a nuisance?"

Before Rex Spiritus could respond, Sang Feng went on. "Rest assured, you have nothing to worry about with the Rites Bureau in charge. These emissaries and pageboys are thoughtful and obedient, their every word and action appropriate. They definitely won't be a nuisance!" Having finished praising them, he urged Rex Spiritus, "Just take one."

"No."

Sure, the emissaries and pageboys your Rites Bureau lets out are obedient, but they also seem locked in a contest to see who's most uptight.

They're all a bunch of killjoys! I could bring back a dozen, and it still wouldn't be lively, so what would I want them for? Rex Spiritus thought.

Rex Spiritus recalled that Lord Sang Feng allegedly shaped the personality of the emissaries and pageboys himself. To avoid being too insulting, he kept his opinions to himself and hummed like he was *really* considering it.

"I like it lively, but I can't sleep when there's anyone else in the house."

This argument was irrefutable. Sang Feng, who was out of reasons, let out a defeated sigh and left, though he glanced behind himself repeatedly as he departed. He was so pitiful that Rex Spiritus found himself courteously calling out after him: "I'll be sure to ask you if I ever need someone."

"Fine, I'll remember you said that."

The fault lay with Sang Feng for being too honest a man. Had he hid in the Seat of Spring Breeze and observed for a few nights more, he would have discovered that Rex Spiritus had lied—especially when he'd claimed he couldn't sleep when anyone else was in his home.

Rex Spiritus had come into existence at Blossomfell Terrace, to the sound of many vibrant voices, and he never minded having other people or their noises in his home. Quite the opposite, in fact; he needed noise to rest. The sound of falling petals or wind worked well. Sometimes he infused joss paper with spiritual energy to bang on gongs and perform operas at his bedside while he rested his eyes. With his chin in one hand, he listened until he drifted to sleep and woke refreshed the next morning.

When he'd spoken with Sang Feng, Rex Spiritus truly had no plans to take in any emissaries or pageboys. But one day not long after, his duty to

clear aberrant timelines took him to Twilight Fen.

Ordinarily, the timelines caused by someone changing the past exhibited similar signs. For instance, someone or something that couldn't possibly exist in a certain region might appear there; time might flow chaotically, skipping back and forth between certain days in the past or future; or people might end up stuck in a strange state between life and death. Rex Spiritus had seen enough oddities to be able to identify them at a glance, even without a heavenly edict. However, once the aberrant branches were completely severed, there was no obvious way to identify that it had been done. He had to rely on heavenly edicts for confirmation.

Still, Wu Xingxue never blindly trusted the heavenly edicts, and he never stopped just because the edict said *It is done.* He often followed the chain of causality to double-check every component and made sure every last twisted branch had been destroyed before returning to Urbs Caelestia. His trips to the mortal realm lasted so long because he was careful never to miss anything or make a mistake when handling a task. Thus, on the day he first met the two skinny little souls outside Twilight Fen, he didn't recognize them for what they were right away. Only after he and the two little ghosts had stared at one another for a minute did he process that they were the wraithlings of legend who haunted the area.

The story had begun to circulate during his three years of sensory-deprived isolation, and the very first heavenly edict he received after opening his eyes had been to restore everyone from that story back to their rightful fate.

He'd spent ten full days traveling through time to sever the causality completely and drag the cultivator responsible back to the beginning of it all.

Sword in hand, he'd watched as the cultivator returned to the path fate had set for him and died in the proper timeline node. He'd then returned everything else to its intended timeline. He clearly remembered the displaced brothers who'd entered the capital city after crossing Twilight Fen. He'd checked to ensure that the world had been restored to its original state. Nothing else should have been awry. So why were these two little souls still in Twilight Fen?

When the boys saw Rex Spiritus, they scampered over and turned their faces upward. "A god!" they cried out, almost as if they knew who he was.

That was even stranger, because people were *not* supposed to remember Rex Spiritus's work. Those whose fates had been set right believed they'd followed their destiny to its end without a single misstep. His eyebrows drew together. At first, he'd assumed the heavenly edict had been mistaken or that he'd missed something during that first purge. However, when he reached out to the souls to check, he realized that the little wraithlings were not truly souls. They were more like phantoms.

Uncertainty nagged at him, so he traced the causality again until he confirmed that he hadn't missed anything. The two brothers were inside that capital city as they should have been, living the life they were meant to live. The two phantoms in Twilight Fen were like a scar left behind in the process of redirecting lives back onto the paths fate intended for them. In a way, they were proof he had finished his work.

Rex Spiritus was very bewildered when they recognized and greeted him. "You've seen me before?"

The smaller wraithling shook his head. The bigger one thought about it, then pointed at Rex Spiritus's mask. "I've seen *that* before."

“Where did you see it?”

This time, they both looked confused and meekly shook their heads.

“Why do you remain here?” Rex Spiritus tipped his chin at the desolate wilderness around them.

The eyes of the two wraithlings almost rolled back into their heads as they struggled to think of an answer, but they couldn’t seem to remember anything at all.

Deep down, Rex Spiritus knew why. They were mere afterimages, so there was no way they could possibly be aware of everything. Afterimages could not interfere with reality, and in due time, they'd fade on their own. He intended to summon a breeze to send them on their way, but the two little ghosts stared at him with wide, pleading eyes. After a moment's hesitation, he dropped his hand with a huff.

"Well, then, suit yourselves. I'm off."

Before he managed to take two steps, the two wraithlings scurried up to him. Whenever he stopped, they stopped. When he walked, they followed again. After several rounds of this, the great Rex Spiritus himself turned back to them and crouched down to their level.

"You two are latched onto me now, aren't you?"

To his surprise, the two little ghosts nodded at him.

All right, then, he thought. *Since they can't interfere with reality either way, I'll just pretend I turned a couple of talismans into paper people.*

Three days later, the rumor flying around Urbs Caelestia was that Rex Spiritus had returned from his duties with a couple of celestial pageboys, so incensing poor Sang Feng of the Rites Bureau that he'd broken down in tears.

The rumor frightened even Sang Feng, but since Rex Spiritus believed the tales, he popped over to the Rites Bureau with his new pageboys in tow to offer some reassurance. After a couple of hours of reassurance, however, Sang Feng really was ready to cry. Sensing trouble, Rex Spiritus grabbed his pageboys and fled.

"My lord!" Sang Feng yelled after him. "Where am I going to send the troop of pageboys I already prepared for you? They've been stuck here for

almost half the year!”

Without stopping or turning around, Rex Spiritus called back, “Save them to wreak havoc on Tianxiu. You never know, right?”

He was tall and long-legged, and he hustled to stop the overzealous Sang Feng from catching up to him. The two pageboys hadn’t yet adapted to the roads of Urbs Caelestia, so even though they worked their little legs and trotted after him as best they could, they still fell far behind.

Only when he reached the white-jade stairs did Rex Spiritus recall he now had pageboys to look after. He finally spun around to wait for the two little tykes to catch up. It was at that precise moment that he first met someone very important in Urbs Caelestia.

Rex Spiritus heard two faint noises: a sword and scabbard vibrating as they clanged against one another. When he turned toward the sounds, he saw the Tianxiu Immortal ascending the white-jade steps, his sword in hand. Tianxiu also noticed Rex Spiritus at the top of the stairs, and he lifted his head. The winds of Urbs Caelestia brushed past his side and swirled up the stairs toward Rex Spiritus, who caught the scent of a familiar soul on the breeze.

For a moment, he stalled. He did not know why, but Tianxiu did the same. Rex Spiritus pulled himself together and parted his thin lips to speak. That was when two little dark shadows ran toward him, so clumsily they nearly collided with his calf.

“My lord, who’s Tianxiu, and why did you tell them to wreak havoc on him?” they asked in unison.

The words stuck in Rex Spiritus’s throat. Tianxiu, who had started walking again and was about to pass them by, stopped in his tracks.

Chapter 55:
Settling the Score

IT WASN'T UNTIL THEY WERE next to Rex Spiritus that the two pageboys noticed someone else was there. They looked up at the Tianxiu Immortal simultaneously—then, in a show of perfect allegiance, dashed around Rex Spiritus to hide behind his robes.

Rex Spiritus had the distinct feeling he'd picked up a set of cursed items. Tianxiu swung his head not toward the babbling pageboys but toward Rex Spiritus.

Rex Spiritus blinked slowly. He'd never before felt such reluctance to introduce himself.

Why don't I just make up a name or something? This couldn't possibly get any worse. Supposedly, Tianxiu kept everyone at arm's length. There was no way he'd know who was who in Urbs Caelestia, and it was doubtful he would remember any titles he'd heard, let alone match them to faces. *So that's exactly what I'll do.*

He was about to speak, but Tianxiu opened his narrow mouth first. When he spoke, his voice rumbled low and dark. "I have no quarrel with you, Rex Spiritus. Why would you wish that others wreak havoc on me?"

Great, *there goes my plan to lie about my name.*

The two pageboys peeked out from behind Rex Spiritus's back, their eyes wide with surprise.

"My lord, is that Tianxiu? Does that mean we spilled something we

shouldn’t have?” they whispered.

Rex Spiritus gave each of the buns on the pageboys’ heads a short tug. “You two really think you’re being quiet, don’t you?”

The clueless pageboys didn’t yet understand the capabilities of Urbs Caelestia’s residents. What the former wraithlings considered whispering might as well have been someone on the corner shouting conspiracies.

“Weren’t we?” one of the pageboys peeped.

Rex Spiritus laughed in exasperation. Seeing him smile, the pageboys tucked their heads back behind him. Perhaps they were spooked. Holding the smile on his face, Rex Spiritus met Tianxiu’s gaze once more. After a brief silence, Rex Spiritus decided to set the record straight.

“You see, it’s like this. I just left Sang Feng. He clung to me and sobbed for ages, and when I couldn’t take it anymore, well, that’s what I said to get away. It was just a joke.”

Surely everyone had experienced the Rites Bureau’s knack for wearing one down. He assumed that the mere mention of Sang Feng would tell Tianxiu exactly what had happened, sparing him from having to explain further.

To his surprise, the Tianxiu Immortal replied in his low voice, “Who is Sang Feng?”

“You really don’t know Sang Feng?”

“Should I?”

“Rites Bureau,” Rex Spiritus reminded him. “He’s the one who arranges for pageboys and emissaries.”

Tianxiu's face fell at once. There wasn't much expression on his face to begin with, but the comprehension that registered as soon as Rex Spiritus mentioned pageboys made it clear Tianxiu was acquainted with Sang Feng's persistence.

"Looks like you've been through it yourself, Tianxiu," said Rex Spiritus, unable to hide his mirth.

"And it seems your idea of havoc is to send the Rites Bureau to torment me some more." Tianxiu watched him through half-lidded eyes.

Rex Spiritus couldn't help but blink. Wasn't Tianxiu supposed to be a man of few words, doling out each syllable like a miser did gold?

"Of course not," Rex Spiritus assured him.

"What did you intend, then?"

Rex Spiritus fumbled for an answer but came up short. The only reply he could offer was a smile that curved his eyes. "As I said, it was just a joke. Don't take it so seriously. If the Rites Bureau really causes you trouble, you can settle your score with me then."

With the slight curl of a finger behind his back, he summoned an unprovoked breeze to sweep the two pageboys out into the open. They looked entirely discombobulated, but before they could ask any questions, Rex Spiritus pressed a finger to the back of each of their heads and pushed them forward. He'd conditioned them into giving certain responses over the past couple of days, and a poke to the head signaled it was time to deliver their farewell speech.

They lifted their faces and said brightly: "We're sure you're busy, and our lord has matters to attend to as well, so we'll be on our way. Goodbye!"

Rex Spiritus turned in time to catch a split second of the indescribable emotion that registered on Tianxiu's face and let out a laugh. It was the first time he'd laughed since his return from the mortal world three days earlier.

He strode off in the direction of the Seat of Spring Breeze, and the silver-etched hems of his fluttering, snow-white robes flowed behind him. Flashes of his tall boots, a silver that matched Urbs Caelestia's cloud-draped marble and windswept haze, were visible as he walked.

The pageboys were so mesmerized they forgot the trouble they'd caused. They scurried to catch up.

"My lord?" one of them said curiously.

Wu Xingxue hummed a lazy acknowledgment.

"My lord, did you have a falling-out with Lord Tianxiu?"

"No, nothing of the sort. How could we have?"

"Then do you get along very well with Tianxiu, my lord?"

"No. That was the first time we met."

"Huh?"

"Huh what?"

As he walked on, Rex Spiritus realized for himself that he and the Tianxiu Immortal had neither exchanged pleasantries nor engaged in small talk. In fact, they'd even skipped self-introductions. No wonder it hadn't seemed like their first meeting—and no wonder the pageboys were so curious.

Then, the pageboys surprised him with their curiosity about something else altogether: "But you knew who he was as soon as you saw him, my

lord."

"He's easy to recognize," Rex Spiritus explained. "The name on the side of his neck hasn't faded yet, and *Mian* was inscribed on the sword in his hand too."

"Oh," said the pageboys just as another question popped into their heads. "How come he knew who *you* were, my lord? You don't have your sword."

Rex Spiritus stopped in his tracks. His pageboys were right; he was not wearing the mask he typically wore nor carrying his sword, Ensis Spiritus. There was no name on the side of his neck either. How could Tianxiu have been so certain of who he was?

He stood frozen in place a moment before he turned to look back. The white-jade steps of the Spirit Terrace were a distant shape far behind him. As he watched, Tianxiu's silhouette ascended the last few steps and vanished into the mist.

Rex Spiritus assumed that their one interaction would be the end of his inconsequential jest. Henceforth, his relationship with the Tianxiu Immortal would surely differ little from his relationships with anyone else in Urbs Caelestia. As for their past connection, it was enough that he remembered it. He had no desire for Tianxiu to recall such things, so he refrained from acting overly familiar. The infamously lazy Rex Spiritus was free with his smiles and loved to tease, but he just couldn't be bothered to socialize.

However, an unfounded rumor soon began circulating in Urbs Caelestia that alleged the relationship between Tianxiu and Rex Spiritus was "far from ordinary."

Rex Spiritus had planned to go out the day he heard this rumor, but the mother hen of the Rites Bureau, Sang Feng, changed that. Sang Feng had brought a jug of wine from the wine pool to share alongside the rumor.

Hearing it left Rex Spiritus very confused. “What do you mean by ‘far from ordinary’? Could you spell it out for me?”

“On the day you called on me at the Rites Bureau, someone saw you and Tianxiu standing on the white-jade stairs to the Spirit Terrace,” said Sang Feng. “They said you spoke for some time.”

“And then?”

“And then nothing. That’s it.”

Lord Rex Spiritus’s heart was now even more bewildered. “Then how did a rumor like that even start?”

“The Tianxiu Immortal hoards his words like gold,” Sang Feng explained patiently. “Talking to him for a while is a marvel among marvels in and of itself. Supposedly, Tianxiu said quite a few sentences that day.”

Rex Spiritus had no idea how to respond. *What is wrong with you people?* he wondered.

“Are the people of Urbs Caelestia in the habit of counting sentences to measure how well others get along?” he grumbled. “Lots of words means you’re friends, and fewer words means you’re enemies? By that metric, my dearest friend is the Spirit Terrace’s Heavenly Principles.”

Sang Feng fell into shocked silence. Whenever someone mentioned the Heavenly Principles, it was always with a mix of reverence, fear, and apprehension. Most celestials would never dare speak of it so flippantly. Sang Feng’s mouth started and stopped for ages until at last he said, “My lord,

please don't joke around like that." It took him a moment to reply to the other half of Rex Spiritus's statement. "And of course we're not measuring relationships by sentence length. If we're counting anything, it would be… Well, it would be how often you visit one another's residences."

"Dropping by, hmm?" Rex Spiritus concluded on his behalf.

Well, there's nothing wrong with that, thought Sang Feng. He decided to go along with Rex Spiritus. "Why, yes. If you drop by someone else's home for no particular reason, it suggests you're close."

"Ah! Now I understand," Wu Xingxue exclaimed, smiling. "In that case, you have a closer relationship with me than Tianxiu." He paused as his fingers gently spun the wine cup on the table. The smile remained on his face, but an odd emotion stirred inside him—wistfulness or sorrow or both. He couldn't say. In any case, it was fleeting. He raised the cup and drank a mouthful of wine.

"At least I've been to your Rites Bureau," he jested. "I don't even know where Tianxiu lives."

Sang Feng was rather slow on the uptake, so he touched the edge of his cup against Rex Spiritus's and knocked back his drink. "Not to boast about the Rites Bureau when it comes to other matters, but no one knows where every celestial lives better than we do! We record such things every day. The Tianxiu Immortal's residence is called Southsill Overlook. It's pretty far from here. You've spent the past few years meditating in your residence, so of course you wouldn't know, but the vital energy of Urbs Caelestia was once quite unbalanced, and two vortexes appeared."

Because Rex Spiritus had been suffering from dulled senses at the time, he truly had no idea what Sang Feng was talking about; this was the

first he'd ever heard of it. "Two vortexes? What do you mean?"

"There were two points, like two currents in an ocean: one where the vital energy was at its most abundant and another where it was at its most scarce. Meng Gu and I started calling them 'vortexes' out of convenience, and the name stuck. I'm sure I needn't tell you that Spirit Terrace is the place where vital energy is strongest. After all, that's where we communicate with the Heavenly Principles. As for where it's most scarce…" Sang Feng paused.

"Southsill Overlook?" proposed Rex Spiritus softly.

Sang Feng nodded. "Correct."

Wu Xingxue frowned. "Does Tianxiu know?"

"Of course he knows. That's why he chose it for his residence. He was invoked during the few days when the vortex was most obvious. Supposedly, anyone passing could see it was as dark and eerie as it could possibly be, just brimming with menace. No one wanted to go near it. What is it they say down below? 'You must fight poison with poison and meet violence with violence.' It's said that the only way to subdue a place like that is to station it with someone whose aura is even more menacing."

But how many celestials who came to Urbs Caelestia via the ordinary route of apotheosis would possess an aura of menace, let alone one strong enough to rival the vortex?

"If an immortal of the Spirit Terrace such as Chief Immortal Hua Xin were to try to subdue it, they'd fail. They might have some effect on it for a few days or a few months, but what about a few years or decades? The menace would completely exhaust most celestials by then. No one has the power to subdue it for long…" Sang Feng paused meaningfully. "No one but Tianxiu." He lowered his voice. "The first time I saw Tianxiu, the aura

around him was impenetrably thick. It was so thick that I almost believed I wasn't looking at a celestial at all but a… It was almost like…"

Sang Feng decided against saying, *Like watching someone step out of a mountain of corpses or swim through a sea of blood, sword still in hand*. He preferred not to speak badly of anyone behind their back, so he hesitated and ultimately stilled his tongue.

Although Sang Feng didn't voice his thoughts, Rex Spiritus could more or less guess what he meant.

"He really is just subduing menace with menace," Sang Feng said finally. "Ever since Tianxiu made that place his home, it cleared right up. Aside from the cold fog lingering around the place, you could almost forget how dark and eerie it used to be." Sang Feng gestured with both hands. "Southsill Overlook and the Spirit Terrace just so happen to be in perfect symmetry, and only once they were each guarding a location did Urbs Caelestia stabilize. If not for Tianxiu, who knows how long Urbs Caelestia would have survived—it might have collapsed one day, taking Mount Taiyin and the celestial pagoda down with it, and brought disaster to the mortal realm."

Rex Spiritus listened without saying much. As Sang Feng wondered aloud how an immortal like Tianxiu had come to possess such a threatening aura, Rex Spiritus became further engrossed in his own thoughts. Unbeknownst to anyone else, he understood perfectly well: An aura like Tianxiu's could only belong to someone who had lived several lifetimes as a general, ending each life on the battlefield after slaying countless souls with his sword. Of course, Rex Spiritus did not just know this in theory, since he'd

witnessed it with his own eyes. In that previous lifetime, Tianxiu had crossed a corpse-strewn wilderness, and his sword never left his hand.

Rex Spiritus could still smell that memory. Strangely, what he smelled was not the blood covering the general. It was difficult to pin down the scent, but the moment it hit his nose, it reminded him of cold iron and deep winter.

"My lord," Sang Feng said suddenly, "you're so patient today."

Rex Spiritus's attention snapped back to the present, and he withdrew his gaze from the window.

"What, am I usually not patient enough for your liking?" He pressed his cup to the table irritably.

Sang Feng gave it some thought. "Well, you've never let me talk this long before."

It wasn't that Rex Spiritus never let anyone speak for long; it was just that he rarely asked follow-up questions. As a result, other people tended to stop as soon as they made their point.

Rex Spiritus twisted and turned his cup by its edge and said nothing. It was true that he paid more attention and listened a little longer when people mentioned the Tianxiu Immortal, but he never let it show on his face. Even the dimwits—the pageboys—who followed him around both day and night never noticed. Even *he* was surprised; he certainly never thought that Sang Feng would be the one to point it out.

On second thought, perhaps Rex Spiritus's actions were perfectly normal. They *did* share a preestablished connection.

"We're talking about Tianxiu, after all," he told Sang Feng. "I hear you people talk about him so much that even I can't help being slightly curious."

Sang Feng nodded. It made sense to him.

Sang Feng didn't know that the "slightly curious" Rex Spiritus did not rest that night. Instead, he went out wearing only a thin robe.

"My lord, where are we heading?" his pageboys inquired as they scampered after him.

"Just taking a casual stroll," he replied mildly.

"Oh, okay."

They never imagined that this casual stroll would take them halfway across Urbs Caelestia. Despite his claim, their lord seemed entirely cognizant of his destination; not one of his turns appeared casual.

Only when Rex Spiritus stopped at a particular jade bridge to look toward the official residence lying across a winding celestial river did the pageboys realize this outing had a specific destination.

"Where are we, my lord?" they asked. They really couldn't understand. Following his gaze, they glanced across the water and shivered. "It's so dark over there."

"Little ones, can you be tight-lipped?"

"Mm-hmm," hummed the pageboys, proving that their lips were sealed tight.

Rex Spiritus smiled for a moment before he grew serious. "That is the official residence called Southsill Overlook."

He did not know if the Tianxiu Immortal had named it, or why he would choose such a name if he had. Rex Spiritus had never before passed through this area and thus never knew how shadowed and eerie it was after nightfall. It was so dark it almost seemed they were beyond Urbs Caelestia.

Looking closer, he noticed lamps were lit inside the residence. The cold gray fog obscured the lamplight, turning it faint from a distance. Sang Feng said that the place had improved significantly over the past two years, but it was hard to imagine what it must have been like when Tianxiu first arrived. Even now, it was almost *too* deserted.

Early the next morning, Sang Feng arrived at the Rites Bureau to find a tall figure waiting in front of it. His jaw dropped for a moment, and he rubbed his eyes hard before accepting what he saw.

"It really is you, Lord Rex Spiritus. But why are you here?" Considering the time, Sang Feng could not fathom why Rex Spiritus—someone who hardly made a habit of dropping in on people—would be in front of the Rites Bureau at this early hour. The scene struck Sang Feng as rather surreal.

Well, if Rex Spiritus has come to the Rites Bureau uninvited, perhaps he has some urgent matter to discuss.

However, after inviting Rex Spiritus through the door and chatting with him for ages about nothing in particular, Sang Feng was fairly certain there was no emergency. He was pleasantly overwhelmed by the attention, but he found himself pinching his thigh to remain alert, nagged by the feeling that some trickery was afoot.

Two jugs of wine later, any perceived trickiness had drifted from his mind, leaving him only to bask in Rex Spiritus's attention.

The Rites Bureau oversaw sundry affairs, and Sang Feng was a fusspot with his nose in all of it, so once he got going, his words flowed like an undammed river. With just a little steering, one could lead him to virtually

any topic one wished to discuss. Thus, when Sang Feng mentioned Southsill Overlook, Rex Spiritus pinched the lip of his wine cup and smiled.

Finally, Rex Spiritus thought. *I'm nearly exhausted.*

Picking up where Sang Feng had left off, he said nonchalantly, "So Tianxiu occupies that menacing area. Hardly anyone ever visits, and there isn't a trace of another's breath within the residence. You say you once tried to give him pageboys but failed. Have you just given up since then?"

Sang Feng fell silent. Facts were facts, but for reasons unclear to him in the moment, he didn't dare respond in the affirmative—almost as if he feared agreeing would make it the Rites Bureau's responsibility. After what felt like hours, he mumbled his reply under his breath.

"Y-yes, but what else could we have done? With Tianxiu being the way he is, I'm out of ideas."

"I also said I didn't want them," Wu Xingxue huffed. "You tried over and over again to convince me anyway. Why not try a little with Tianxiu?"

"I already tried! I even put my life on the line when I asked Meng Gu to help me."

"Oh? What exactly did you try?"

Sang Feng rubbed his jaw as if he had a toothache. "I requested that she use her feminine wiles." Before Rex Spiritus could ask any follow-up questions, Sang Feng went on. "She told me if I ever came up with any other ideas as harebrained as that one, she'd skin me alive."

"Say, do all your pageboys act in the same manner?" Rex Spiritus asked suddenly. He'd been about to ask if all of Sang Feng's pageboys were as uptight as he was, but he'd rephrased to spare Sang Feng's dignity.

Not that Sang Feng noticed. “Oh yes,” he said with a nod. “They’re all so mature.”

“In that case, how about you bring a few of them to my place tomorrow?”

Sang Feng perked up. “What? Really? Lord Rex Spiritus, are you planning to take them in?”

“No.” His tone left no room for doubt. “I’ll fine-tune them a bit. After that, you can send them to Tianxiu.”

Sang Feng looked skeptical. “Will that work?”

It did work, as it turned out. Within two days, the Rites Bureau sent a letter to the Seat of Spring Breeze gushing with praise. The letter writer was ecstatic. To paraphrase, the letter read:

Just as you instructed, I left all twelve boys in Southsill Overlook’s outer courtyard while Tianxiu was away. I waited in the Rites Bureau for two days, but Tianxiu never sent the pageboys back! As soon as Tianxiu returned to his residence last time, a single-file line of pageboys came walking back to the Rites Bureau before I could finish my tea. Even Meng Gu is stunned! I’ve never before seen such an expression on her face. How on earth did you manage it, my lord?

The two pageboys delivered the message with feeling and artistry. “My lord, will you write a reply?” they asked when they were done.

“No need. It’s fine as long as it’s done.”

“How *did* you manage it, my lord?”

Their lord didn’t let a single thing slip. “You’ll have to guess.”

Before the pageboys could chance any conjecture, the answer came knocking at their door. Rex Spiritus was reclining at the edge of his bed with his head propped in his hand, ready to turn a few balls of paper into a noisy nighttime chorus, when he heard the stomping of one pageboy's feet as he ran into the room.

"My lord! There's someone outside the estate!"

This caught Rex Spiritus by surprise—usually, he'd be the first to know if someone visited the Seat of Spring Breeze. Even for the celestials of Urbs Caelestia, sneaking up on him was no easy task. That was the case whether or not he was preoccupied and not focused fully on his surroundings. He straightened.

"Who is it?"

The pageboy tried to answer, but then a snow-white set of robes brushed him. His vision blurred, and by the time it cleared, his lord was no longer on his bed, and a new voice was echoing from the courtyard.

Rex Spiritus couldn't be bothered to use the door. With a single robe draped around his shoulders, he stepped out through the wide windowsill. His figure melded almost completely into the night mist; one moment, he was by the window, and the next, he was peering through the outer courtyard gates.

A long string of lanterns hung by the doors to the Seat of Spring Breeze. They looked a bit like the lanterns illuminating the market at Blossomfell Terrace. Their bright beams of light intertwined and weaved together into a dazzling glow. Beneath the lanterns' soft glow stood a statuesque figure, his back against the wall and his sword in his arms. His eyes downcast, the Tianxiu Immortal waited for the pageboy to announce his presence.

Rex Spiritus was taken aback. Rare were the visitors to his Seat of Spring Breeze, and rarer still were the visitors who came at this late hour. That his visitor was the ever-aloof Tianxiu Immortal was a marvel indeed.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Tianxiu focused on Rex Spiritus, but he did not answer. Rotating the sword in his hand, he knocked its hilt on the wall a little farther away. "Come on out," he called.

What? Confused, Rex Spiritus followed the sound with his eyes. A line of pageboys barely reaching his knees filed neatly from around the corner. They gathered before Rex Spiritus, their eyes lowered.

"Look familiar to you?" Tianxiu asked calmly.

Rex Spiritus didn't answer. Of course they looked familiar. He didn't have to count to know they were an even dozen, no more and no less, every one of them forced upon Tianxiu by the Rites Bureau. Rex Spiritus had made some minor adjustments to each of them and recognized them at once.

Uh-oh, he thought, *this sure doesn't seem like a social call.*

Sure enough, Tianxiu tipped his chin toward the pageboys and addressed Rex Spiritus in his resonant voice. "You once invited me to settle my score with you should the Rites Bureau ever come after me. I've just returned from some work outside of Urbs Caelestia." The dust of his journey from the mortal realm still clung to his clothes. He straightened from where he'd been leaning on the wall and raised his sword to push the long string of lanterns aside. "I've come to settle the score. I hope it's not too late?"

Chapter 56:
A Guest

SETTLE THE SCORE? Rex Spiritus looked levelly at Tianxiu for a second.

"Yes, it's too late."

With a crook of his finger, the gates to the Seat of Spring Breeze slammed shut with a loud bang.

The two pageboys dashed over, then skidded to a halt by Rex Spiritus's leg.

"Hmm?" They were ready to greet their guest but found the gates tightly sealed. Their lord was leaning beside the gates with his arms crossed while their guest seemed to have been locked out. The pageboys were about to ask when they saw Rex Spiritus place a finger in front of his lips to shush them.

Lowering their voices, they whispered, "My lord, why have you locked the front gate?"

"For self-preservation," Rex Spiritus said, his tone measured.

The bewildered pageboys stared at one another, unsure what to do next and more curious than ever. "Who's at the door?"

"The Tianxiu Immortal."

Comprehension flashed across the pageboys' faces. "Oh."

The smaller one blinked. "What is Lord Tianxiu doing here?"

"He wants to fight me," Rex Spiritus replied casually.

Unable to weather any more suspense, the smaller one spoke up again. “My lord, what did you do? Why would Lord Tianxiu want to fight you?”

That’s a long story, Rex Spiritus thought as he beckoned the pageboys over. They leaned in with solemn expressions, eager to hear the big secret. But instead of explaining, he flicked each of them on the forehead.

The pageboys grasped their foreheads, then noticed a strange buzzing in their minds, as if they’d suddenly entered another state. Their lord didn’t open his mouth, but they could hear him speak.

‹The pageboys from the Rites Bureau are too much like little old men,› he told them. *‹There’s no hint of life to them, and they’re far too obedient—so I made a few changes.›*

What he’d done was quite simple, if something of a dirty trick. He often transformed sheets of joss paper into actors to beat gongs and perform operas at his bedside. He wasn’t terribly picky regarding the content of those operas, and he adapted most from whatever he overheard in the marketplace while poised on the edge of Blossomfell Terrace: melodramas, tragic love stories, some good, some bad, an eclectic mix of everything. Artistic value aside, these tales livened the place. Before the Rites Bureau sent the twelve pageboys to the Seat of Spring Breeze, Rex Spiritus had imbued them with some of the qualities he gave his paper actors. They were all made of paper, anyway, so they were essentially the same.

“What happens when you add that?” one curious little pageboy whispered.

What happened was that the upgraded pageboys had the energy of the living. The paper was also reinforced, preventing long-term exposure to

Southsill Overlook's intense atmosphere from exhausting their vital energy. But Rex Spiritus had opted to focus on the most distinctive feature:

‹They can act. Their tears are very *pathetic.›*

The pageboys were stumped on what good that was, but Rex Spiritus knew exactly what he'd done. This was, after all, a mess of his own design. If the Rites Bureau had sent the same old pageboys to Southsill Overlook, they'd have immediately and obediently marched right back to the Rites Bureau the second the Tianxiu Immortal said, *Run along home. I don't need you.*

However, with a little tinkering from Rex Spiritus, the pageboys would react differently to their banishment. Now, whenever the Tianxiu Immortal ordered them back to the Rites Bureau, they would grab hold of his robes and sob until the seas ran dry.

The pageboys considered this in astonished silence for a while.

"But…won't those pageboys be beaten for crying like that?"

Rex Spiritus hummed a negative. "No, they won't." After a pause, he appended, "Well, they probably won't."

"How come?"

"Because Lord Tianxiu is softhearted."

Picturing Tianxiu's cold and severe demeanor, the pageboys found this assessment a bit hard to believe. By all appearances, he seemed as far from softhearted as the length of eight beams laid end to end.

The two pageboys were not alone in their impression of the Tianxiu Immortal. Most people in Urbs Caelestia, including the Rites Bureau, found him intimidating and distant. As the Tianxiu Immortal led a line of sobbing

pageboys to the Seat of Spring Breeze to settle his score, the Rites Bureau finally discovered Rex Spiritus's scheme.

Meng Gu pinched a paper talisman used for passing messages between her fingers and waved it in Sang Feng's face so violently it sounded like she was shaking a tree.

Sang Feng leaned away lest it hit him in the face. "Did something go wrong again? If so, my apologies," he said out of habit.

"What do you mean 'my apologies'?!" sputtered Meng Gu, tossing the talisman to him. "I did some digging!"

"And what did you hear?"

Meng Gu sucked air through her teeth. "Why Tianxiu didn't return our pageboys."

"Ah, I see." He nodded. "That." He beamed as soon as he thought of it, but he squared his features again when he noticed the agitated expression on her face. "What is it? This is a good thing, isn't it?"

She forced out a bitter laugh.

"Hey, spare me the suspense," he said, feeling tense. "Your face is going to give me a heart attack. It's unsettling!"

"According to what I've heard, Lord Tianxiu returned to Urbs Caelestia yesterday evening and saw the pageboys we sent over."

"And?"

"And he tried to return them to the Rites Bureau right away."

"So what stopped him?"

Meng Gu's expression grew indefinable. "As soon as Tianxiu ordered them back to the Rites Bureau, all twelve pageboys shuffled over to him and surrounded him…"

Sang Feng couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"…then they each grabbed a corner of Tianxiu's robes, wailed, and started to cry inconsolably. Just overwhelmed with grief," she continued.

His disbelief doubled.

"The two most outrageous ones wept, turned their tiny faces up to him, unable to stand straight—they're so small, you know—and almost collapsed on their backs, though they were hit on the back with a sword aura and managed to remain upright."

His disbelief triplicated! He struggled to think of what to ask her, and eventually settled on: "Are they dead?"

"Who do you mean?" she asked after a pause.

"The two that got hit with sword aura—did they turn back into paper talismans on the spot?"

"Nope."

"Where did you hear this?" The tale struck Sang Feng as increasingly unbelievable. It was simply too weird to be true.

"From an emissary of the Spirit Terrace. They happened to pass by as it happened, but they stayed out of the way to avoid ending up as collateral damage."

Most celestial emissaries of the Spirit Terrace were similar in temperament to Chief Immortal Hua Xin—they were unlikely to make things

up. Sang Feng had no choice but to believe Meng Gu's words for the most part, but he struggled to accept them.

"Are they sure that's what they really saw? What if they're mistaken?"

"No way. The emissary even heard Tianxiu ask the pageboys a question. Flatly, as usual."

"What did he ask?"

"He asked them who taught them this technique, whether it was something they'd learned from the Rites Bureau, but the pageboys were sobbing so hysterically that they all gasped for breath and couldn't answer him. The emissary said that Tianxiu looked away and stood there for a while. Eventually, he thrust out his sword aura and swept all twelve little pageboys into the sun room of Southsill Overlook."

Sang Feng leaned forward in his seat as he waited for more. "And then?"

"And then the Tianxiu Immortal received another heavenly edict. He must not have had time to do anything before departing for the mortal realm. He returned to Urbs Caelestia just now."

As Sang Feng listened, his face turned green.

"I'm going to die," he muttered at last. He could picture it in his head. Any moment now, Tianxiu's Sword of Absolution would strike his neck.

Tianxiu had already returned to Urbs Caelestia, so for the sake of self-preservation, Sang Feng decided he'd better head to Tianxiu's residence and apologize. Without considering the late hour, Sang Feng hurried to Southsill Overlook.

He heard not a sound coming from the entire residence when he arrived. Not a single lantern was lit. He grabbed a celestial emissary on night patrol.

"Did you see Lord Tianxiu return to his residence?" he asked.

"I did, but he went out as soon as he came back," the emissary said.

"*What*? Where'd he go?"

"He was headed in the direction of the Seat of Spring Breeze."

"To the Seat of Spring Breeze? At this time of night?"

"Correct."

Puzzling this over, Sang Feng rushed at once to the Seat of Spring Breeze.

When he arrived, he saw the Tianxiu Immortal outside the gates. Strangely, the front gates were shut—and stranger still, Tianxiu was allowing them to remain shut. His head was dipped low as if he were speaking with the person on the other side of the gate, and he appeared in no hurry to enter or leave. The mood was palpably charged, and right as Sang Feng prepared to walk over, he had a change of heart.

He took one quiet step back, turned, and snuck away.

Within the Seat of Spring Breeze, Rex Spiritus had no inkling of Lord Sang's dithering.

His two pageboys were still lingering over the secret adjustments their lord had made to Tianxiu's pageboys. They didn't know who in Urbs Caelestia was the best fighter nor who was strongest, but as they compared their lord's slender and graceful figure with the imposing steeliness of the Tianxiu Immortal at their door, they reached a conclusion.

“My lord, let’s run for it,” they advised solemnly.

Still leaning against the door, Lord Rex Spiritus laughed. “Oh sure, you two run along first. I’ll bring up the rear.”

“How come?”

“I have my sword. If Lord Tianxiu wants to flatten the Seat of Spring Breeze, I should be able to block at least one move. I’ll last a little longer than the two of you.”

The little pageboys inhaled a sharp, cold breath. “Oh my! Flatten the Seat of Spring Breeze? Is Lord Tianxiu really that angry?”

“Hmm. It’s hard to say,” answered Rex Spiritus truthfully. He had cast no restrictive ward, and he was no longer speaking via etheric whispers. With only a door between them, it didn’t matter how quiet they made their voices; that was just a little fun for the kids. The immortal outside could hear everything just fine.

Once he was done with the dramatics, Rex Spiritus leaned against the door and chuckled.

Tianxiu’s voice rang out on the other side of the jade door. “Having fun?” He must have been leaning against the door as well. His deep voice resonated through the door and jade walls, only making it sound even closer.

Rex Spiritus cupped the shell of his ear.

“The great Rex Spiritus himself,” Tianxiu added. After reciting that title, he paused.

Rex Spiritus waited for him to continue, but the rest of the words never came. Tianxiu seemed to be deliberating yet unable to find any suitable adjectives.

Eventually, his voice slipped through the gap between the large jade doors: “Duly noted.”

“And what are you duly noting?” Rex Spiritus asked.

“That keeping your gates closed is a fine way to welcome guests.”

“Lord Tianxiu, you come to my door with no smile on your face and a sword in your hand, and you still expect me to welcome you? You came to settle a score, not for a social visit,” Rex Spiritus said unhurriedly. He only meant to tease Tianxiu a little—the gates weren’t really shut, and he wasn’t really hiding behind them—but before he said anything more, he stopped himself.

The strain of wistfulness and sorrow he’d felt when chatting with Sang Feng earlier emerged again for a breath from the pool of his heart.

A multitude of celestials dwelled in Urbs Caelestia. They all started off as individuals who had nothing to do with one another. As long as they brought along a fresh jug of wine, celestials could freely visit each other; after a few such visits, they could even call themselves friends. Yet the man at Rex Spiritus’s door, with whom he shared a deeply rooted connection, could not visit without making some excuse about settling a score.

Rex Spiritus laughed to himself but lost all desire to keep teasing.

“Little ones,” he said, shooting a glance at the pageboys by the door.

They looked up at him.

“Scoot over a bit.”

The pageboys didn’t understand but stepped away from the door without protest. As soon as they moved, his finger twitched. The jade gates swung open.

Twelve pageboys still stood there as though beneath a dark cloud, huddled in a ball of discontent, devastated that they were about to be sent away. Tianxiu stood within the shadows of the long string of lanterns, his sword as ever in his arms and his chin tipped slightly downward. He clearly had not anticipated that Rex Spiritus would suddenly open the gates, and when he raised his eyes, they were blank.

Rex Spiritus's face betrayed nothing. His expression was relaxed. There was even a hint of a smile in his eyes. He wanted to say, *Never mind. I'll stop making your life difficult, Lord Tianxiu. How would you like to settle this score? Tell me, and I'll listen.*

Tianxiu spoke first. Without the thick jade gates between them, his voice blended with the night mist. It was still rather flat but even deeper than before.

"I could be here for a visit, too," he said.

Chapter 57:
The Barrows

WHEN THE TWELVE PAGEBOYS heard "visit," they brightened considerably. *A visit is good!* they thought to themselves. *A visit means he's not here to send us away!*

Thanks to Rex Spiritus's modifications, the little ones were somehow even more alive than living things. In essence, they were spirits born to stage a performance. Though they'd been despondent beneath a dark cloud just moments earlier, they were now smiling so hard their eyes turned to slits.

When the Tianxiu Immortal let his guard down for a second, the twelve pageboys slipped away without making a sound. By the time he looked at them again, they had already arranged themselves into two tidy rows of six on either side of the gates to the Seat of Spring Breeze. Folding their hands together, they bowed and addressed him in sweet, babyish voices: "My lord, this way, please."

Xiao Fuxuan seemed to have been struck dumb by the sight.

Rex Spiritus turned his face to the side, wondering whether he'd gone just a teensy bit overboard with his modifications. His own two pageboys were wide-eyed, their jaws open halfway to the floor. Finally, they looked at him.

"My Lord, is this—"

Before they could finish their question, Rex Spiritus twitched a finger behind his back. He knew the two little ones were about to ask if the twelve

bowing pageboys were the ones he'd dramatically modified, but their words changed as they exited their mouths.

"—so these are Lord Tianxiu's pageboys?" they said. "Wow!"

The two pageboys gaped at one another, then touched their mouths, wondering if they were possessed.

There's a lot I could say about these little ones, but one thing's for sure —they know how to sell me out! And always to the same person. Couldn't they try someone else for once? Rex Spiritus thought as he shot each of the pageboys a meaningful look.

Lucky for him, all of Tianxiu's attention was on the twelve orderly pageboys, and he seemed unaware of anything else. Rex Spiritus put his mind to rest.

The twelve pageboys bowed with their hands clasped for ages, but their master did not take another step. Confounded, they raised their heads one by one.

"My lord?"

The first thing they noticed was their lord's completely vacant expression. The pageboys silently resumed their bows. Two symmetrical rows of heads topped with neat buns faced Tianxiu.

Forgetting that he was the chief culprit of this situation, Rex Spiritus watched this spectacle unfold with amusement that sparkled in his eyes. "Be careful. If you stay out there any longer, they might return to act one and start the show over again."

A soft gust of wind brushed the front of his nose as he finished speaking, and then Tianxiu was inside the Seat of Spring Breeze's courtyard.

Rex Spiritus smiled, closed the gates, and strode toward the house. Tianxiu walked at his side, half a shoulder's width behind. Within just these few steps, Rex Spiritus experienced firsthand what all in Urbs Caelestia described.

The Tianxiu Immortal's presence was impossible to ignore, even if he said nothing.

Long, mist-like sheers hung from atop the doorframe of the room before them. Rex Spiritus's two pageboys were quite experienced at this point, so they swiftly stepped ahead to pull aside the curtains. At long last, Lord Rex Spiritus observed proper hospitality—as they entered the room, he turned and stepped aside to allow his guest to pass. Tianxiu raised the curtain as he moved forward, but he stopped and turned to Rex Spiritus before entering. They were only a breath apart. Tianxiu's mouth opened.

"Are the twelve pageboys behind me your handiwork?" His voice was pitched deep; it was clearly a question, yet his tone trended down and showed no sign of uncertainty. It seem more like a definitive statement.

Nevertheless, Rex Spiritus flat out denied it. "No."

Xiao Fuxuan lifted an eyebrow.

"Why would I tamper with your pageboys?" asked Wu Xingxue.

Tianxiu did not move for a moment. Finally, he nodded. "Is that so?" he said. Then he passed Rex Spiritus by.

Tianxiu's expression remained placid, and it didn't seem like he was about to pull anything. Still, though he could not say why, Rex Spiritus felt that those three simple words were loaded with implications.

You're overthinking it. It wasn't long before he quietly amended that statement: *I'm not thinking too much, I'm thinking too little. He hasn't come to pay a social call. He's here to mess with me.*

He asked his pageboys to fetch a jug of wine. Once it arrived, he poured a full cup for Tianxiu, who picked it up, knocked it back without any hesitation, and turned to the pageboys at his side.

"Good wine," he said calmly to the pageboys. "Go thank our host."

Still holding the cup in his hand, Rex Spiritus had no time to wonder what *that* meant before the twelve pageboys had formed an enthusiastic single-file line. One at a time, they eagerly approached him.

The first one walked up, gave him a deep bow, and clasped his hands together. Had he been holding three joss sticks, it would have been the standard gesture for honoring one's ancestors in an ancestral hall. Rex Spiritus watched, perplexed, as the pageboy straightened and said, "Thank you, Rex Spiritus, for your hospitality!" before running off.

Next, the pageboy behind him stepped forward. He, too, executed a deep bow, doubling at the waist. "Thank you, Rex Spiritus, for your hospitality!" After that, he scampered away.

A third boy stepped forward—then a fourth, then a fifth. In the end, they thanked him twelve times in a row. Rex Spiritus had yet to manage half a sip of wine, yet he was starting to feel a bit tipsy just watching them.

This was only the beginning. The Tianxiu Immortal was a man of few words, so on his own he was a refined, quiet guest. However, thanks to his twelve pageboys, the Seat of Spring Breeze wasn't quiet for a single moment. Lest Lord Tianxiu decide not to keep them, they were unusually eager to please. At first, they followed each command to the letter, but as the night

wore on, they began to anticipate what was desired of them without requiring directives: Whenever Xiao Fuxuan toasted Rex Spiritus, there were twelve extra clinks. Whenever he poured wine for Rex Spiritus, twelve jugs of wine waited reverently nearby to refill his cup as soon as he emptied it. His cup was never once dry.

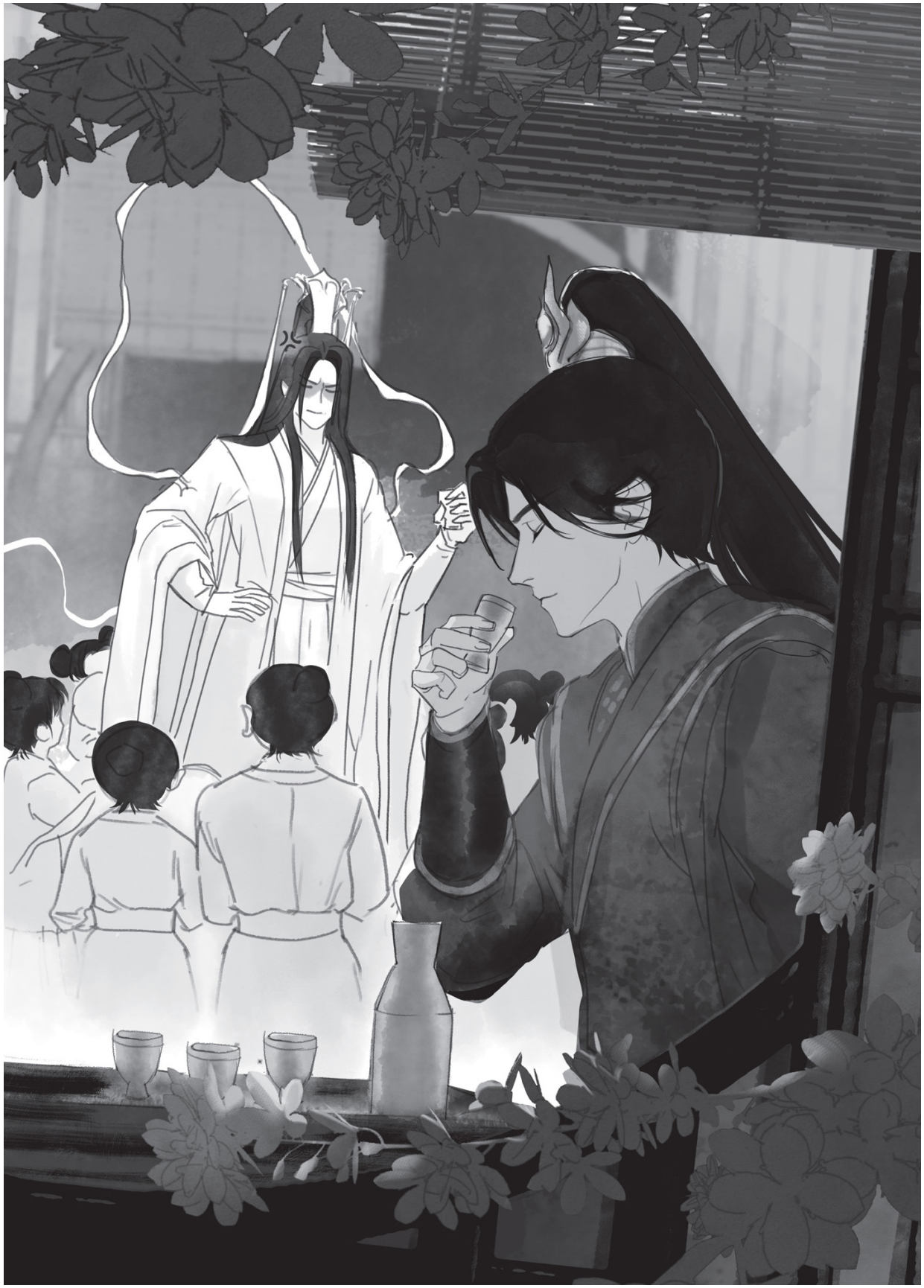
The new batch of ambrosia from the wine pool was a little stronger than usual, and it heated Rex Spiritus's blood. When he flushed, twelve fans began flapping at his side. The twelve eager pageboys gave Rex Spiritus's own set of pageboys no chance to contribute; each time the duo tried to reach him first, one of Xiao Fuxuan's little ones blocked them. Four fists were no match for twenty-four hands, and in the end, Rex Spiritus's two little pageboys surrendered and stood like pillars nearby, hands in their sleeves, to pass along wine jugs and fans as needed. When Rex Spiritus saw them there, dejectedly handing out fans, he laughed in utter exasperation and finally put an end to his rites of hospitality. He set his white-jade cup on the table.

"Xiao Mian!"

When celestials in Urbs Caelestia spoke of this man, they called him by his title, "Tianxiu." When addressing him in person, they had to include the honorific "Lord." No one dared to call "Lord Tianxiu" by his actual surname, "Xiao," especially not in the tone Rex Spiritus had just used; such familiarity was discourteous under normal circumstances. But Rex Spiritus, born of the Arbor Divinus and raised by nature, was notably informal and accustomed to doing as he wished. Tianxiu was very different; people described him as aloof, imposing, distant. He was the last person one would expect to tolerate discourtesy, but when Rex Spiritus called him Xiao Mian, he knocked back the wine in his cup just as before.

The jut of Tianxiu's throat bobbed as he swallowed, then he replied with a low "Mm-hmm?" The ambrosia was potent. He'd drunk quite a bit, though the color in his eyes, like cold stars in a winter night sky, remained unchanged. "Rex Spiritus is angry."

When the pageboys heard that, their expressions grew overcast, and they turned their faces up to Rex Spiritus as one. Their fans stopped mid-flap as they froze where they stood, their glossy grape-black eyes swimming with tears.



While Rex Spiritus stared at them, all twelve pageboys surrounded him, grabbed his robes, and let their tears fall. Rex Spiritus closed his eyes in utter vexation before he reached out and took hold of Tianxiu.

The Tianxiu Immortal had just returned from the mortal realm after fulfilling his duties there. He was dressed from head to toe in black, and Rex Spiritus's fingers looked even more pale and slender against the bracers of dark, muted gold he wore around his cuffs. It was almost impossible to tell how steady Rex Spiritus's delicate hands were when wielding a sword, nor how swift and decisive each killing blow they delivered was. Tianxiu studied those fingers, and his attention remained fixed there for a moment before he looked up again.

Rex Spiritus smiled at him with refined elegance, until he purposefully replaced his grin with a blank face. "You know something? Perhaps it's best you be on your way. Take your pageboys and return to Southsill Overlook."

In that moment, Rex Spiritus's face that changed at the drop of a hat and the wailing mess of pageboys complemented each other rather well. Tianxiu took in the whole scene. Then, as he turned his face away, his mouth flickered.

Much later, when Wu Xingxue recalled this scene, he still believed he'd caught a vanishingly rare smile light up Xiao Fuxuan's face—there and gone again in a flash.

That half-captured smile threw Rex Spiritus off track, and before he knew what he was saying, he blurted out, "How did you recognize me that day?"

Tianxiu, who had just stood to retrieve his sword, paused at the question with his hand hanging in the air. He returned his eyes to Rex

Spiritus. “Which day?”

“What other day could I be talking about?”

Xiao Fuxuan worked it out. “On the jade steps?”

“Correct,” Rex Spiritus said with a nod.

“There is only one Rex Spiritus in all of Urbs Caelestia. How could I not recognize you?”

On the face of it, that made sense, but although there was only one Rex Spiritus in all of Urbs Caelestia, they’d never met before that day. Hearing about Rex Spiritus from other celestials wasn’t the same as seeing him with one’s own eyes, no matter how vividly he might have been described. Tianxiu would still have needed to rely on Rex Spiritus’s most distinctive features to identify him. Rex Spiritus recalled the words of his pageboys that day.

“I wasn’t wearing my mask, I didn’t have my sword, and there was no trace of my bestowed name on my neck, so how did you ever—”

Before he could finish, a clang rang out inside the room. Rex Spiritus broke off midsentence and looked toward the sound. His long sword, which he’d left leaning against the bed, had inexplicably shifted and clattered to the floor. Raising a hand, he grabbed at the air. Right away, the Ensis Spiritus traced a beautiful arc through the air and landed in his hand.

Celestial swords were imbued with spirit and resonated with both people and objects. On occasion, they suddenly moved on their own. Ensis Spiritus also contained jadehaem that had transmogrified from the blood of Tianxiu’s past life.

“What’s the matter with your sword?” Tianxiu asked. He was just a step away.

“Oh!” Rex Spiritus softly exclaimed. His downcast eyes scanned the sword, then he held it away from himself and twirled it in his hand. “It’s nothing. It’s just a bit more…sensitive than other swords.”

Sword users were inevitably more discerning about weapons, able to judge a blade’s quality with a single glance. Besides, this was Rex Spiritus’s sword.

“This sword of yours isn’t forged from iron.”

“You have good eyes, Tianxiu. It is indeed not refined from any metal.” Wu Xingxue paused before he continued in a quiet voice. “It was transmogrified from jadehaem.”

“Jadehaem?”

“Yes. There’s a place in the mortal realm called Blossomfell Terrace. I wonder if you’ve heard of it? Jadehaem is found there.” When he mentioned Blossomfell Terrace, he met Tianxiu’s eyes. His face was unchanged and placid; it was clear he’d never heard of the place.

He doesn’t remember anymore. Just as I thought. Rex Spiritus averted his gaze, no longer wanting to ask the question he’d had the impulse to raise earlier.

It was strange. Had this happened before, he’d have felt some degree of disappointment. Now, perhaps because Tianxiu had actually entered the Seat of Spring Breeze as a willing guest, the disappointment came and went so quickly it was almost as if it had never been there at all.

With his sword behind his back, Rex Spiritus shot a look at his two pageboys to signal them to see their guest out. Just then, Tianxiu spoke again.

“I’ve seen you in the mortal realm before.”

Rex Spiritus's fingers tightened, and his eyes snapped back to Tianxiu. It took the former a moment to realize that the latter had been listening when he posed that half-asked question. Tianxiu had answered it.

"How did you recognize me?"

"I've seen you in the mortal realm before."

"Where in the mortal realm?"

Tianxiu's slender eyes narrowed, lost in thought. "A long time ago. At the Barrows."

Rex Spiritus's hand relaxed. This answer both met and exceeded his expectations. Tianxiu had not said, *At the Arbor Divinus in Blossomfell Terrace,* as Rex Spiritus might have anticipated; he'd instead named the Barrows.

The Barrows was a name that had come into use after Blossomfell Terrace but several decades before Urbs Caelestia. Not a city, mountain, or island, the Barrows was a stretch of unremarkable wilderness on the outskirts of what would later become Reverie. The reason that desolate expanse merited its own name was a series of wars that had taken place there on and off over several centuries.

Many generations of people had died in these wars, and the conflicts had lasted so long they'd spanned several ordinary lifetimes. The bodies of the fallen there had been heaped in towering, jumbled mounds of severed limbs, blood, and mud, the remains so jumbled that they could not be told apart once the smoke finally cleared.

Since most of the deceased's families had been utterly destroyed as well, few were left to identify or collect the dead. Any unidentified and

unclaimed corpses were transported to that lonely stretch of land, where they were lowered into the sandy mud and stone slates to be stacked layer upon layer in giant burial mounds. The mounds were built one after another, and each held thousands of the dead.

As time passed, the barren expanse became known as a place where nameless bodies were buried, and thus it earned its name: the Barrows. In the whole world, it was probably the one place where the dead gathered in the greatest numbers.

It was ripe for transformation into a vortex of absolute menace and malevolence.

Everything in the world has its counterpart, and once the Barrows housed a massive number of burial mounds, it gained a corresponding tomb guardian. To protect such a place, the guardian required a specific set of skills. The one who chose to have his abode there was a rogue cultivator who belonged to neither clan nor sect. All of his relatives were already dead and buried right there in the Barrows, so he built a tall pagoda at its border and made it his home.

An ancient bell hung atop the pagoda. Every day at nightfall, the guardian patrolled the Barrows. If nothing was amiss, he leaped to the top of the pagoda to ring the bell. All who lived near the Barrows could hear the sound. When the bell rang, they knew all was well that night.

In time, the tomb guardian began taking in homeless children. There was something unique about these children that allowed them to live in the Barrows: Each of them had been born to fates heavy with menace and malevolence. This counteracted the energy of the Barrows, sparing them an early demise. Still, staying in such a place eventually caused harm to the

living, so the guardian taught the children various arts to help them survive. To them, he was both their father and their teacher.

These events could have become a legend or simply a charming folktale that circulated for many years to come. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

After many years of residing in a location so cursed with malice, the guardian was affected without realizing it. While cultivating one day, his attention strayed just enough. Weighed down by the aura of the Barrows, he experienced an energy deviation.

He became a different person from that moment on. Terrifying thoughts started to plague him—he craved blood and raw flesh, desired success and prosperity, and hated feeling his aging body decay bit by bit. None of this showed on his face. Since he continued to keep the peace in the Barrows, those who knew him never suspected he longed to act beyond the bounds of decency.

In time, the children he'd sheltered and raised in his isolated pagoda became his first sacrifices to stop his transformation. Blood, flesh, skin, bones—once he started down the infernal path, he craved them endlessly.

To avoid detection, he was particularly careful and discreet whenever he killed one of the children. He knew he was most likely to succeed if he started with those nearest and dearest to him. Killing them caused so little commotion, it was effortless. He never made a sound. He took time to savor each child, then painstakingly covered his tracks. The living inhabitants of the pagoda dwindled while the number of walking corpses increased, with none the wiser.

As the guardian became more corrupted, his cravings grew until his once-cautious methods no longer suited his needs. Mere humans could no longer halt his transformation. He continued to age and decay, and each day when he opened his eyes, he smelled his own rot as he withered on the inside.

He kept the last three of his most troublesome disciples alive as a contingency plan, then went in search of new solutions for his growing corruption. He controlled both the walking corpses and his still-living disciples, compelling them to do anything he preferred not to do himself—for tasks better suited to the dead, he sent his walking corpses; for tasks better suited to the living, he dispatched his three disciples. Thus, several years went by.

Through insidious sorcery, the guardian paved a "road" from the Barrows's millions of dead. With it, he obtained a few branches that had broken off of the Arbor Divinus when it was sealed.

It would have been extremely difficult to hide fragments of the Arbor Divinus within the mortal realm under ordinary circumstances, but the Barrows was the exception to this rule. Amid countless clusters of burial mounds that encased innumerable dead, the fetor of death and aura of menace suffused the entire region. A place like that, cursed with malevolence most foul, was perfect for covering up the scent of the Arbor Divinus.

This led the guardian down the tempting path many had walked before him: using fragments of the Arbor Divinus to travel back and forth through time.

First, he returned to the node just before he'd killed his first child and drove away everyone he had once taken in. He endured his evil thoughts alone for many years until they erupted anyway. This time, he could not

contain a shred of his madness—he slaughtered everyone in a nearby city until the destruction spiraled completely out of control.

Next, he tried going back to the time preceding his energy deviation. He would seal away his powers then and there. But when the moment came, he could not bear to give up all he'd experienced after his deviation, nor the satisfaction he'd felt when he'd acted on his desires.

He even tried traveling to an earlier moment in an attempt to avoid the Barrows altogether and find a different place to make his home. When he happened upon revenants stirring up mischief in the Barrows, however, he could not help interfering, and he resumed his previous path, step by step.

Human beings were unfathomably complicated. After going back and forth so many times, the guardian himself could not be sure whether his nature was good or evil. Why had he done so many good deeds only to turn around and commit so much evil? Why was he able to consume the flesh of the humans he slaughtered without batting an eye but unable to ignore those suffering from the influx of revenants?

In time, he grew numb. He lived those decades over and over again. When one thing didn't work, he tried another. When that failed, he tried something else. Sometimes, he suspected he was the only dead person in the world with no home to return to, trapped in a web woven of lost decades. Eventually, he forgot what he was hoping to accomplish by returning to his past in the first place. All he knew was that he longed to go back.

That was the most troublesome heavenly edict Rex Spiritus had ever received. The guardian had traveled back in time so often, he'd created dozens of timelines all on his own.

Rex Spiritus remembered it clearly: At the start of each timeline, he'd landed in the Barrows, where he'd stood beneath that dark pagoda in which not a single lamp was lit and gazed up at the bell hung overhead. Every time, he pressed the silver-filigreed mask over his face to conceal it, and with a flick of his sword hilt, he approached the blue-gray cold fog. Once he crossed the fog, he arrived in one of the timelines.

He watched the guardian walk his predetermined path until he found the turning point where causality shifted. Then, Rex Spiritus raised his sword and severed the timeline, leaving no trace.

He carefully inspected each timeline he severed to tidy up any loose ends, and only when he confirmed that everything was in its place did he move on to the next one. Confirming there were no errors meant he had to watch each pivotal moment as it happened. He traveled like this among many aberrant timelines: cutting them down, putting things back in order, double-checking his work. He had to witness the guardian patrol the burial mounds with a spirit-warding lamp each day before proceeding to the top of the pagoda to ring that ancient bell. He had to watch the guardian devolve from someone who helped others to someone who killed. He had to stand by while the guardian descended again and again from good to evil.

Over and over, Rex Spiritus had to ensure that the children the guardian had taken in walked into the tiger's den and were slaughtered one after another, all to become walking corpses in thrall to a cruel master.

Sometimes, Rex Spiritus stood by the children's dead bodies for a long time, but it was impossible to guess what was on his mind. His sword hand remained steady, and he stood in the fog without wavering. His mask concealed his face, so no one could say what expression he wore beneath it. He remained that way until he flicked his sword clean of grime and melted back into the fog.

In due course, Rex Spiritus observed the tomb guardian's life one too many times. He watched the children die too many times, saw the wilderness strewn with corpses too many times, and reached a point when a faint but nuanced loathing washed over him. He didn't know what caused this feeling nor against whom it was directed. Did he loathe those who acted without regard for the consequences, or did he loathe himself, who wielded his sword like a bystander while horror unfolded around him?

After Rex Spiritus cleared away every last one of the aberrant timelines, he returned to his core timeline in the mortal realm. Coincidentally, it happened to be the Third Month, so he took a trip to Blossomfell Terrace.

The Mount Blossomfell Bazaar had just opened, and lanterns illuminated the mountains for four miles around with the soft glow of rouge. He had no fixed destination, so he weaved aimlessly through a teeming sea of people and watched the busy stalls, the wagons rolling to and fro, the smoke rising hazily from homes' hearths. He leaned against one inn's pillar and listened to a storyteller's long-winded tale, sat through several acts of an

opera featuring gongs loud enough to shake the heavens, and delighted a couple of tykes with tempting cakes and snacks.

It was the longest he'd ever stayed in the mortal realm, but because he'd crisscrossed many aberrant timelines, little time had passed in the core timeline. From everyone else's perspective, Rex Spiritus had left Urbs Caelestia just two days prior and spent most of that time around Blossomfell Terrace. No one knew what he'd witnessed nor what he'd done, and no one knew why he loved that bustling bazaar so dearly.

Tianxiu was the first and only person to say he'd seen Rex Spiritus in the Barrows.

Chapter 58:
Coffin

THE SENSATION OF BEING ripped from his memories was deeply unpleasant for Wu Xingxue. Countless overlapping sounds and voices still echoed in his ears. He could hear the Tianxiu of the past saying, *"I've seen you in the mortal realm before."* He could hear the hawkers and storytellers in the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar, the wind whistling through the Barrows, the distant wailing of ghosts, and the bell ringing from atop the guardian's pagoda. There was even a voice from a nameless soul Rex Spiritus had once given deliverance, who had lingered to ask him in a barely audible murmur, *"Who are you?"*

At first, there were far too many sounds, but they finally faded away, leaving behind a single thought: This pagoda, long hidden away as the Feng Clan's sanctuary, was the very same one where the guardian of the Barrows had once resided.

Wu Xingxue looked around the pagoda through the phantom of the Arbor Divinus. Under the force of Xiao Fuxuan's sword aura, not one area of the pagoda remained unscathed. Beams had fallen and splintered apart, scattering the jadehaem and the Arbor Divinus's broken branches across the floor. There was no hint of the structure it had been back then. Its appearance had changed, its architecture was different, and the ancient bell that once hung atop it was nowhere in sight. If the guardian himself were standing here now, he wouldn't recognize it.

There should have been no way the guardian could recognize the pagoda anyway. It was *gone*.

When it'd all been over, and Wu Xingxue had severed the last aberrant timeline, the pagoda had already been destroyed. The guardian had been sapped of the last of his vitality or tired of constantly retracing his steps—or perhaps his noble side had managed to prevail one last time. In any case, he'd cast a curse, knelt in the pagoda, and closed his eyes. In an all-encompassing blaze, he'd destroyed himself and the pagoda alike.

It should have been impossible for it to appear again.

At least, that was what everyone else but Wu Xingxue would think. *He* knew that even a destroyed pagoda could reappear, perfectly intact. Not in the present world, but in the alternate reality of an aberrant timeline. If the heavenly edict had been imprecise and missed a timeline that Rex Spiritus then failed to sever, everything and everyone who existed there would continue to move forward in time. In such a timeline, the guardian might never have cast his curse, leaving the pagoda intact.

Right now, they were standing in an unsevered timeline.

"No wonder…" murmured Wu Xingxue.

No wonder Ning Huaishan and Yi Wusheng had said Feng Shulan's age didn't add up, and no wonder they'd never heard of someone named Feng Huiming. This place and their world did not share the same path at all; this was an aberrant timeline that had begun in the distant past.

Nevertheless, causality should still have applied, even here. Elements that had nothing to do with one another wouldn't become entwined for no reason. Even if this pagoda had never been destroyed, it should still have

been tied to the guardian—but the Feng Clan had somehow drawn it into their territory and made it their estate's sanctuary.

Now *that* was intriguing. Could the guardian have kept close ties to the Feng Clan and left them the pagoda when he died? Perhaps the Feng Clan had needed the pagoda for some reason and subsumed it into their territory. The most likely explanation, however, was that the Feng Clan had claimed the cursed pagoda to subdue the remnants of evil within, and over time, selfish motives had driven them to harness the powers of the Arbor Divinus to aid their cultivation.

As Wu Xingxue considered the possibilities, he heard the metallic ring of a swinging sword. He looked up to see a phantom of the Sword of Absolution arcing through the air, straight for Feng Huiming.

The blade glided just past his neck and embedded itself in the wall.

Feng Huiming was deathly pale, his eyes fixed on the still-quivering blade, but he did not simply resign himself to his fate. He dropped on his back to the floor to avoid the sword, then pushed both palms behind him. With a horizontal spin, he sprang to his feet and grabbed for his own sword.

There was a loud rumble, and Absolution extracted itself from the wall to land unerringly in front of Feng Huiming's hand, as if it'd anticipated his next move. Had he moved his hand an inch further, the sword would have impaled his palm. Feng Huiming sucked in a sharp breath before launching into a backflip that became a roll—and once again, Xiao Fuxuan's sword stopped him, this time slipping just past his cheek.

Feng Huiming tried again and again to fight back, until at last his neck, arms, legs, and head were wreathed in golden phantom swords. If he so much as moved, he'd die on the spot.

“Why, *you*…!” Seething with fury yet unable to move, Feng Huiming clenched his fists tight and hissed his words through gritted teeth. “Lord Immortal, if you have something to say, just say it. Why insist on cornering me like this?!”

Xiao Fuxuan’s voice rang out as requested: “What is this pagoda doing in your clan’s estate?”

Wu Xingxue started before he remembered that Xiao Fuxuan’s vital force was still wrapped around his heart. He could hear every thought in Wu Xingxue’s head, so of course he knew what Wu Xingxue had been mulling over.

“I don’t know!” Feng Huiming’s eyes were bloodshot. His gaze flicked back and forth to the sword auras aimed at every vulnerable spot on his body. “I really don’t know!”

“You know,” Xiao Fuxuan said coldly.

Feng Huiming seemed to freeze as he gasped for breath. “H-how would I know?!” he demanded hoarsely. “This pagoda was already here when I joined the Feng Clan! Everything I know came from the patriarch, and I already told you all of it. This place is the Feng Clan’s sanctuary. That’s what the patriarch always told me, and I’ve taken him at his word! This is our secret sanctuary, our clan built this pagoda, we—”

Before Feng Huiming could finish, Wu Xingxue appeared in front of him.

“Looks like you really do know. You almost had me fooled,” Wu Xingxue said. He’d assumed Xiao Fuxuan was trying to trick Feng Huiming

at first, but then Feng Huiming had let slip that he had some knowledge he shouldn't.

"What?! I didn't fool you, everything I said was the truth, I haven't told a single lie!"

"Is that so?" asked Wu Xingxue. "The way you're reacting, it sure doesn't seem like it."

"What could you possibly mean by that?"

"If you truly knew nothing and accepted your patriarch's word about this pagoda, you would've answered differently when he asked you what this pagoda was doing in your clan's estate," said Wu Xingxue, pointing at Xiao Fuxuan. "If you had nothing to hide, the only reasonable response would be, 'Where else would we build a pagoda if not our own estate?' If not that, you should have at least had a look on your face that made it obvious you didn't understand his question." Wu Xingxue lifted the hems of his robes and dropped lower so he could meet Feng Huiming's eyes. His voice dropped as well. "But you didn't. You answered too fast."

Feng Huiming had answered without a hint of hesitation, showing he understood Xiao Fuxuan's question. He knew the pagoda should never have been at the Feng estate to begin with.

Feng Huiming's entire body tensed. He glared at Wu Xingxue. His lips turned gray from how tightly he'd pressed them together, giving his skin a strange, deathly pallor.

It could have been a trick of the light, but…

Wu Xingxue frowned and studied Feng Huiming closely. Just as Wu Xingxue was about to reach out and check, he heard Xiao Fuxuan's voice.

“You’re going to die soon. Are you aware?”

His words were so blunt that Feng Huiming’s expression soured like milk.

Even Ning Huaishan, who had followed Xiao Fuxuan over, was surprised. “You’re serious?” he muttered.

Xiao Fuxuan made no reply.

Feng Huiming pressed his lips even tighter together and didn’t say a word. The ashen pallor of his skin could no longer be concealed. Seeing that in combination with his reaction, even Ning Huaishan sucked air through his teeth and said, “So it *is* true! You knew about it? Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“I can live,” croaked Feng Huiming. “I’ve found a way. I’m not going to die. The Feng Clan…with the way the Feng Clan is now, they could not go on without me. *I’m not going to die*.”

Wu Xingxue raised an eyebrow and exchanged a glance with Xiao Fuxuan.

‹Xiao Fuxuan, why is he going to die soon?› Wu Xingxue asked through the vital force around his heart. *‹This pallor of his looks strange to me. It doesn’t seem related to his health.›*

Xiao Fuxuan peered at Feng Huiming and reached out to examine his soul. *‹Looks like some sort of forbidden life-trade art,›* he whispered back.

‹Life-trade?›

Xiao Fuxuan hummed affirmatively. *‹The other person is already dead.›*

Someone was trying to use Feng Huiming's life to bring back the dead. The sorcery was ongoing and might have even been near completion, hence the inexplicable aura of death swirling around Feng Huiming. Had they wanted to provoke Feng Huiming into telling the truth, saying these words to his face would have been persuasive; few would accept their own life being sacrificed for another's. It really was rather tragic. Still, Wu Xingxue chose to use etheric whispers rather than tell Feng Huiming.

Even without Feng Huiming's input, they could piece together a rough outline of what had transpired, because his position within the Feng Clan meant there was only one person who could have done this to him: the patriarch. Furthermore, since life-trading was a forbidden art, it suggested the patriarch had used ignoble means that relied on revenants or other evil creatures to achieve his goals. It was becoming clearer and clearer how the guardian's pagoda had ended up in the Feng estate.

‹Can you figure out whose life his is being traded for?› Wu Xingxue asked.

‹I can try.›

Wu Xingxue nodded. Nearby, Ning Huaishan watched the two of them and blinked a few times, his face slowly growing more and more confused.

"Archon, why did you just nod? Did somebody say something?"

Wu Xingxue ignored him.

Ning Huaishan tried again. "Did I go deaf?" As soon as he asked, he was struck with an epiphany. "Oh! Etheric whispers…"

Since he'd figured it out on his own, Wu Xingxue was just about to let Ning Huaishan be. Then, Wu Xingxue felt a poke in his arm followed by an

etheric whisper in Ning Huaishan's pleading voice.

‹Archon, don't just talk with Tianxiu. It makes me anxious when you do that.›

"You would get anxious? Why?" asked Wu Xingxue, perplexed.

‹I assume that I've done something dumb again and you're thinking about how to punish me.›

You win, thought Wu Xingxue. *Just how many dumb things must one have done to have such ideas?*

He was about to tell Ning Huaishan he could etheric whisper with him if it was really that important when he felt the vital force over his heart stir with a light pinch. It diverted his attention at once. He turned to Xiao Fuxuan and heard his voice vibrating inside him.

‹I found it.›

Wu Xingxue didn't bother further with Ning Huaishan. *‹Who is his life being traded with?›*

‹I don't know who, but they're right underneath the pagoda,› said Xiao Fuxuan. He lifted his hand, and the Sword of Absolution flew into it. Putting his palm against the hilt, he pointed the tip toward the floor and struck down in one swift motion. With the sword's tip as their epicenter, hundreds of cracks spread rapidly across the granite floor.

As the floor began to collapse, Feng Huiming cried out, "No! Don't open—"

The threat of the sword aura became the least of his concerns. He covered his eyes with one hand, squeezed his eyelids shut, and used his other hand to try and plug one ear. He was desperate not to see what was buried

beneath the pagoda—because once he did, he would have to admit that he'd been the one destined to be sacrificed from the very beginning.

The floor only sank about an inch or so before the momentum ceased. Glowing white chains shot through the room, burrowing into each fissure before emerging from another with the jarring sound of metal grinding on stone. In the blink of an eye, the chains wove themselves into a giant net that held the crumbling floor aloft and prevented further collapse.

Who's there?! Wu Xingxue whipped his head in the direction from which the chains had emerged.

The pagoda's doors were wide open, and there was a residual glow outside from the last flash of otherworldly lightning. A figure stood just beyond the doors. His two hands clutched the other ends of the chains. Judging by his ramrod-straight silhouette, the man appeared in the prime of his life. This was common among cultivators of the celestial path, so it was hardly surprising. However, the lantern light revealed a face heavy with age, with two deep lines on either side of his mouth. Cultivators' voices and appearances were resistant to change, and even a hundred years would not have aged them to this degree, so this man had to have lived for a long, long time. The stark frown lines gave him a persistent look of bitter anger.

The newcomer's eyes swept over the pagoda's crumbling interior. "I heard from our disciples that several rare guests arrived at our door in the middle of the night and that Huiming led them here." Judging from his tone, he *must* have been the Feng Clan's patriarch. "Our disciples are quite young, so they get a bit tongue-tied when they panic. I was already in bed too, so my head was cloudy. It took me a while to figure out what they were trying to tell

me, and I still don't quite know what's going on. All I know is that our guests are important people. Celestials, perhaps?"

His indifferent tone lacked any reverence. After all, the Feng Clan was entrusted to watch over the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar and guard the domain where the Arbor Divinus was sealed. Their special status extended beyond the mortal realm. As patriarch of the Feng Clan, he was hardly fazed when facing minor celestials. Clutching the chains tight, he stepped over the threshold and into the pagoda.

"When celestial guests come to our door, I can't let our elder and disciples greet them without a formal welcome. It would be most discourteous of us. I rushed here to greet you myself and to see which honored immortals of Urbs Caelestia have taken such an interest in our pagoda to cause this commotion. I—"

As he entered, he finally shifted his attention from the shattered floor to the so-called celestials within—and forgot to continue his speech. Tension seized his face as his gaze swept over Xiao Fuxuan. When he saw Wu Xingxue, his pupils contracted, and his thin lips began to tremble. "You're…"

Wu Xingxue arched an eyebrow. *‹What a strange reaction. It's almost as if the patriarch knows me,›* he whispered to Xiao Fuxuan. *‹I have no memory of him at all.›*

Xiao Fuxuan did not reply right away. Eventually, he said, *‹There are plenty of people you have no memory of.›*

Wu Xingxue was a little thrown by these words. He called to mind the time in Urbs Caelestia when Xiao Fuxuan said, *"I've seen you in the mortal realm before…at the Barrows."*

He really had no memory of when that could have been. He'd always assumed Xiao Fuxuan had just happened to pass by and see him. Hearing Xiao Fuxuan's loaded response made Wu Xingxue realize it might not have played out the way he'd imagined. Unfortunately, this was hardly the time to ask more.

The Feng patriarch had stiffened at the sight of Wu Xingxue, but he still gripped the chains holding up the floor in his hands. Maybe it was just an illusion, but something about his posture suggested he'd burned all his bridges, as though he knew he was doomed to face an ill-fated death that very night, and there was no other way out. He cast his gaze downward and pitched his hoarse voice so low it could have scraped the ground. "Even if it is truly the two of you…I will not let go of these chains tonight."

"You know who I am?" asked Wu Xingxue.

The deep wrinkles lining the Feng patriarch's mouth twitched.

"Yes. In my…in my youth, I was struck with a curse and nearly lost my life."

Wu Xingxue paused. The legend of the Arbor Divinus had only started to spread because every once in a while, someone like the patriarch had appeared—someone who'd almost died from some accident but miraculously survived. They were the ones who'd seen the Arbor Divinus with their own eyes. There were also rumors that someone had seen the Arbor Divinus's human form enter the Blossomfell shrine in the middle of the night to place a jade carving on its altar. The person who'd seen him had been one more witness.

"It was perhaps because of this celestial encounter that I was fortunate enough to be appointed guardian of Blossomfell Terrace," said the Feng

patriarch. His rough voice prodded at Wu Xingxue.

"Celestial encounter…fortunate…" Wu Xingxue softly repeated those words, then bent down to pick up a broken branch from the Arbor Divinus. "Tell me something. These broken branches, this pagoda, this floor that you're preventing from collapsing—what part of it looks celestial to you, and how is any of it fortunate?" Wu Xingxue scanned the area around him. "I fail to see what any of this has to do with celestials or fortune."

The Feng patriarch's expression grew grimmer, showing a rare look of distress.

Xiao Fuxuan thrust his sword into the floor, then wiped away a speck of fresh debris that fell on him with the back of his finger. "Either you tell us now, or I force it open."

The Feng patriarch's eyes snapped up sharply, only to slowly slide down again. Tension tightened his back and shoulders, and his veins nearly popped from his neck, but his grip on the chains remained firm. He made no move to step aside.

"I've come this far. It is what it is. Whether I tell you or not is of no consequence."

"Very well," Xiao Fuxuan replied gravely.

Power surged through his sword hand, and a massive cyclone that seemed to extend from heaven to earth tore through the pagoda like a dragon in flight, its spiraling coil absorbing everything within its reach. Shards of wood from the broken beams, altars and meditation cushions, metal and stone—nothing was spared. Even Ning Huaishan and Feng Huiming had to wedge their swords into the floor to anchor themselves and avoid being swept into the cyclone. Everything deformed within the writhing aura, and the chains

beneath the floor rattled and smacked against each other hard enough to shed sparks. When they could no longer secure the granite floor, thick slabs of stone shattered and crumbled into dust in the pummeling wind.

The next thing they knew, Xiao Fuxuan's sword slashed through the air, casting golden light over every last one of the chains.

A cultivator and his divine instruments were spiritually linked. When the chains were severed, the Feng patriarch could no longer control himself and let out a long howl. His meridians bulged beneath his skin, turning him monstrous, but still he continued to toss out chain after chain. Each time one chain was severed, he replaced it—for every ten chains Xiao Fuxuan sliced, he sent out ten more. The metallic snap of chains breaking and clattering as they locked into place continued on and on.

In the end, the Feng patriarch was first to yield.

The veins protruding from his skin ripped somewhere along his body, and blood gushed from the wounds, flowing over his arms and down his fingers to stain the chains crimson. The first time a new chain did not manage to fasten, his strength failed to land, and he stumbled. Then it happened a second time, and a third. Abruptly, every chain on one side was severed.

With the abrupt loss of strength on one side, the patriarch fell to his knees as the wind roared around him. An instant later, the other side failed. The last glowing chain snapped and crumbled, and a deafening boom echoed as the granite floor crumbled and exposed what lay buried beneath the pagoda.

The first things Wu Xingxue saw were two coffins surrounded by candles and placed at the center of a giant arcane formation. Next, he heard tens of thousands of high-pitched shrieks and bloodcurdling screams. The last

time he'd heard sounds like that had been at the endless burial mounds in the Barrows. In fact, this place didn't just sound like the Barrows—it smelled like it too.

Someone had lured scores of the dead from the Barrows to the pagoda to seal them below, where the souls sustained the two coffins. All the while, that person had cultivated in the forbidden life-trade arts.

Such an overwhelming aura of menace and nether energy should have been noticeable to anyone within a hundred miles of it, but as fragments of the Arbor Divinus were embedded within the pagoda's beams, its power concealed the terrible aura just so. At the same time, the stench hidden within disguised the presence of the Arbor Divinus's fragments. In a sense, they complemented one another.

Wu Xingxue's face fell. It was no wonder that the aura of the Arbor Divinus here felt both familiar and strange, somehow tainted with malevolence. It was because of whatever was sealed underground.

"Who are the people inside the coffins?" Wu Xingxue asked in a low voice.

The Feng patriarch gripped the crumbled white chains as he knelt between the broken slabs. His hands were covered in blood, and he could not tear his gaze away from the two coffins. He croaked a laugh but didn't answer.

At last, he admitted, "They're my son and daughter."

Children? Wu Xingxue furrowed his brow, glancing instinctively at Feng Huiming.

Though Feng Huiming's hand was still on his sword hilt, he dropped to the floor, exhausted. His head lolled on his chest. Even his breath trembled.

The patriarch's life-trade was using Feng Huiming to bring back his deceased children. The Feng patriarch only had eyes for the coffins.

"My son was noble and upright, generous and mild, but a little frail in build. My beloved daughter was two years younger. She was bright, talented, and had just the perfect constitution for the martial arts, a temperament like steel…"

Even when his children had been very young, he'd thought about what would happen once they grew up. He could pass on his leadership position to his talented daughter while his son became a complementary elder who worked on alchemy and managed their Hall of Medicine. Together, the siblings would uphold the Feng Clan's reputation. What a heartwarming story it would be.

Unfortunately, both his son and daughter had died before reaching adulthood—on the same day, in the same way, with no prior indication of their imminent demise. Because others did not know what had killed them, they lamented their loss without knowing how to comfort their surviving father. All they could say to him was "My condolences."

But their father knew what had happened. When he'd been struck with a curse in his youth, he'd been destined to die. Instead, he'd been forcibly snatched from the jaws of death. He knew that the nefarious method of his rescue meant there would one day be a price to pay, but he'd never imagined the price would be paid by his son and daughter.

So many times, he'd scoffed, *The Feng Clan cuts down evil creatures. Why should we suffer such retribution?*

It was unfair, and that was why he refused to accept it.

He'd searched high and low for a way to bring his beloved son and daughter back from their coffins so that they might live again and become shining beacons that brought honor to his clan. At last, he'd discovered the forbidden art of life-trading, which was difficult to achieve but simple at its core. All it required was the souls of the dead and the lives of the living. First, he needed the souls of the dead to pave the path. Then, he needed the life of a living person to exchange for his children's. One or two souls weren't enough; he needed thousands or more to pave the way for the exchange of life.

He'd turned to the Barrows with its many massive burial mounds and the countless souls buried within. He hadn't anticipated that a rogue cultivator would make the Barrows his home and assume its guardianship, erecting a pagoda there and patrolling the lands day and night. Each day the guardian patrolled the Barrows delayed the patriarch's plan yet another day.

So, he'd laid a trap. The guardian soon suffered an energy deviation that sent him down the infernal path, and the pagoda became a breeding ground for filth and corruption.

Whether the guardian had been killed or sealed away in the end, the patriarch knew his demise had been justified.

Chapter 59:
Hollow Sentiments

THE FENG PATRIARCH RAMBLED ON about how wonderful his two children were and what a shame it was they were gone, his every word brimming with affection.

Clutching his sword, Feng Huiming listened in silence for a long while before he stirred. He began to shake. It started with his fingers and traveled through his entire body until even his sword rattled. The blade, still wedged into the floor, clacked and clanged. Slowly, the ripples this little pebble caused grew wider and wider.

Ning Huaishan, who was nearest, noticed first. He turned to Feng Huiming, assuming he was wounded and shuddering with pain, only to discover that Feng Huiming was laughing. Half derision and half rage, his laughter carried a strain of unnameable madness. Ning Huaishan's hair stood on end.

"'My son, my son, my son'…nothing but 'my son' from your mouth," Feng Huiming said, his chin still pressed to his chest. Nodding over and over, he repeated the patriarch's words, his rasping voice rueful. "How foolish, how stupid was I to get turned around and lose my head just because you called me those words a few times!"

He laughed so long he began to choke.

"To think I treasured those two words so much, believing they were sincere, believing you called me your son because you saw me as one of your own. I really am such a…" He took a heaving breath and raised his head,

turning his bloodshot eyes to the Feng patriarch in the crimson lamplight. “I really am such an ‘*exceptional candidate’*—just like you always said. I never understood it before, but I couldn’t possibly understand it better than I do right now. What an exceptional candidate I was, to be fooled so completely just because you said ‘son’ a few times. Where else would you find someone so stupid? When you first took me in, you must have thought the same.”

Otherwise, he would never have said something like *“Eight is just the right age.”*

Feng Huiming had just turned eight when the Feng patriarch led him through the clan’s gates. He was old enough to understand some truths of the world. He knew full well that his family was dead and gone, that with no support he was doomed to a precarious life, never knowing what the next day might bring. Thanks to the patriarch, he had a roof to shield him from the rain. He had a home.

From that moment forward, all he gained was thanks to the patriarch. His mentors at the Hall of Disciples taught him one must be grateful and repay any kindness. This advice stayed with him for many years. He knew he was not the true blood of the Feng Clan, and none of his privileges were a matter of course. He earned them with hard work, obedience, and the honor he brought to the clan.

Everyone described the patriarch as a stern and reserved man. He was strict and not known to be a kind father. Making him smile was harder than reaching apotheosis, and it was rare to receive a word of praise from him. For a long while, Feng Huiming wished every day for the patriarch to just nod at him and tell him he’d done all right. He worked harder than any other initiate, wearing out more sets of practice robes and whetstones than anyone else.

It took Feng Huiming another eight years to reach the day the patriarch smiled at him and said, “My son is such an exceptional candidate.” Feng Huiming’s mistaken belief that he and the patriarch were as kind father and filial son sprouted from that single “my son.”

Feng Huiming was a fiery, passionate youth, so full of unwavering devotion that he wished he could dig out his heart and offer it to the Feng Clan. He just wanted to be useful. Once, he went so far as to tell Feng Shulan, “Should the time come for me to lay down my life, I will do so without hesitation.”

But Feng Shulan threw cold water over his words when she answered, “We’re no different than the other disciples.”

From that point forward, he and his so-called younger sister stopped seeing eye to eye.

Feng Huiming was so bewitched by that single spellbinding utterance of “my son,” he convinced himself that he was equal to the patriarch’s biological son despite being adopted. He thought he would be the one to assume the great responsibility of serving as patriarch in the future. Why else would the patriarch have told Feng Huiming so much about the Feng Clan’s history and fateful encounters? The patriarch even brought Feng Huiming along to the Fengs’ secret sanctuary, where no one else was allowed.

Feng Huiming deluded himself for nearly a century—until the day he noticed he was emanating an elusive yet undeniable aura of death.

At first, he thought he’d been accidentally afflicted with infernal energy while cutting down fiends. Stupidly, he alerted the patriarch right away, like he was just some ordinary son reporting a minor injury to his doting father. Yes, he told the patriarch *all* about his strange new aura.

Looking deeply concerned, the patriarch called for the elder from the Hall of Medicine and personally monitored Feng Huiming's examination. Next, the patriarch led him to the sanctuary where he could recuperate using the powers of the Arbor Divinus. Feng Huiming was incredibly moved.

Feng Huiming had always remembered that day. Just what had he been thinking back then?

"I was so moved I didn't know what to do with myself. Did you know that?" Feng Huiming asked bitterly. With one clap of his palm against the floor, he shifted in front of the patriarch. The tip of Feng Huiming's sword deeply scored the granite beneath him.

The line between the patriarch's brows twitched, and the broken chains lifted and hovered in the air. Every cross section narrowed into a blade, then the sharp ends shot straight for Feng Huiming.

Sword auras erupted from Feng Huiming as well, and each line of glowing white pushed back against the chain blades. Sparks scattered in every direction. As if he were utterly unafraid of the sharpened chains, Feng Huiming took another step forward and narrowed his bloodshot eyes.

"I used to wish I could dig out my heart for you! Did you know that—*Father*?!" he snarled through gritted teeth.

When he heard the word "father," the patriarch's fingers spasmed as they clutched the chains, but that was all. His grip did not loosen one bit.

"The depth of my gratitude only matched the depth of my disillusion when I finally discovered what was wrong." Feng Huiming moved another inch forward. His fingers bled from the tremor caused by their clashing forces, but he did not seem to notice. "Have you ever felt that kind of betrayal

for yourself? It's like stripping yourself naked to stand in a snowfield. It's worse than death!"

The patriarch went blank for a moment, then his forehead creased deeply. "You… You knew?"

Feng Huiming slowly began to laugh again, the sound a blend of self-mockery and wretched sorrow. "Yes, I knew. Every time we came to this pagoda and I used the powers of the Arbor Divinus to recuperate, the aura of death would be temporarily concealed. But eventually, even a simpleton would figure out that something was seriously wrong. Why are you so surprised? Are you saying that, in your eyes, I'm so dumb I'm beyond saving? Did you really think I wouldn't notice all the signs?"

The patriarch's lips pulled downward. Hearing Feng Huiming's question, Wu Xingxue, Xiao Fuxuan, and Ning Huaishan frowned as well. They'd thought Feng Huiming knew about the aura of death clinging to his body but merely had a vague suspicion something was off. The longer he spoke, the more it seemed as if he'd not only noticed the aura emanating from his body, but he'd also known about the life-trade formation.

Ning Huaishan couldn't help but ask, "Why? Why would you go through with it? Are you crazy?"

"Why would I go through with it?" Feng Huiming rasped. "I want to know why too! Obviously, I could have just killed him instead!" He glared at the patriarch. "Yes, that's right. I could have killed you. Did you know that?! I came up with so many different ways to do it—I imagined it so many times. I could've done it any of those times! Had I steeled myself just once, I could've made sure you died before me. I could've interrogated you a

hundred different ways, each worse than death, torturing you until I made you tell me yourself exactly what you did to me…"

His sword auras progressed another inch, clacking and clanking as they pressed against the patriarch's chains. Both sides shook.

"I could have forced you to take this thing off of me and move it onto your own body," said Feng Huiming. "I thought about it so many times—"

"Then why didn't you?" interrupted Ning Huaishan.

"Because I…"

He hesitated, no longer able to keep the fluster from showing on his face. It only made him seem more pitiful as he glared at the patriarch before him, his mouth quivering and his expression grim, unable to offer a single word. Why?

Because he was indecisive. He was not a good person, yet when he'd wanted to act ruthlessly, he had not seen it through. Each time those sinister thoughts arose in him, he recalled the moment the patriarch had walked him through the Feng Clan's gates, holding his hand—and he recalled his lessons in the Hall of Disciples, his mentors telling him to always be grateful and repay every kindness.

His plots to kill the patriarch had only surfaced in his dreams. As soon as he opened his eyes, he would tamp the ideas down and hide them beneath his heart, so deep he could pretend to know nothing at all. Eventually, he convinced himself that as long as he didn't touch, ask about, or see the life-trade formation, then none of it was real—it was nothing but his paranoia and wild assumptions.

He had thought about solidifying his position ahead of time and taking over as leader of the Feng Clan. That way, he would become the person in the Feng Clan with the most say before the life-trade formation finished its work. In such a scenario, perhaps his "father" would consider the big picture and change his mind.

Feng Huiming was an adopted son who'd served up his heart on a platter for so many years. Even someone who fed a stray dog felt some affection toward it. Surely the patriarch would show some reluctance to strike the killing blow.

Now, he waited for his adoptive father to show that reluctance.

"It's not like I couldn't have saved myself," Feng Huiming said heavily. "Don't you get it? I just…" *I just wanted you to regret what you'd done to me. I just wanted you to show a shred of fatherly love.*

He didn't finish his sentence aloud, but the patriarch seemed to understand what he meant. For one fleeting moment, a complicated expression showed on the patriarch's face. It almost looked like remorse.

Feng Huiming noticed and narrowed his eyes. "Is this another one of your false shows of goodwill? Are you trying to trick me again?"

At a time like this, his words expressed something other than what he truly felt.

The patriarch's face shifted several times until it slowly darkened again. He still refused to say what Feng Huiming wanted to hear. In the middle of their final confrontation, his only reply was:

"It is what it is. I have nothing left to say."

"'It is what it is'?" Feng Huiming repeated. *"It is what it is?"*

This was a matter of life and death, the sum total of so many years of messy emotions—and in the end, the man he'd loved like a father brushed it aside with just five simple words: *"It is what it is."* When he heard those five words, the last glimmer of light dimmed in Feng Huiming's eyes. It was only now that he realized he'd harbored a sliver of hope that the patriarch would feel any remorse. That would have made the wishful thinking of Feng Huiming's youth seem like less of a joke.

Unfortunately, it was what it was.

At long last, he was ready to push past his indecision and act on his ruthlessness. Following a subtle nod of his head, he exploded into action. A powerful sword aura erupted from his body, lighting everything around him a stark white. This was the sum of all he'd learned in the Feng Clan over the past century. His diligence, hard work, and desire to please were enclosed within this aura and poured into the sword in his hand. The color drained rapidly from his face as the aura of death suffusing his body intensified. This reaction confirmed it: He was using his vitality to fight back.

The Feng patriarch had already suffered a severe injury at the hands of Xiao Fuxuan. Beneath the force of Feng Huiming's vital move, he finally succumbed. For one moment, his eyes widened. Then, he looked down. A sword wrapped in a glowing white aura and emblazoned with the character *Feng* had impaled his body. The remaining chains in his hands crumbled to dust.

He heard Feng Huiming's voice.

"I'm satisfied."

Since the day Feng Huiming had realized the patriarch intended to sacrifice him, he'd bottled his feelings up in his chest, leaving himself joyless

and withdrawn. He'd never truly smiled again until now. He was truly, finally satisfied.

Xiao Fuxuan raised his fingers. He'd refrained from intervening earlier to give Feng Huiming the chance to seek an answer for himself. Now that the answer had been given, the unfortunate soul was satisfied, and Xiao Fuxuan did not need to wait any longer. Inside the pagoda, a golden light glowed. The Sword of Absolution's phantom blade pierced the Feng patriarch's soul, passed through his body, and stuck into the floor beneath him.

It was time for another reckoning.

Chapter 60:
Fragmented Soul

MOST CULTIVATORS of the celestial path knew that when Tianxiu Xiao Mian imposed judgement on a fiend, a reckoning was sure to follow. As the Feng patriarch's soul was enveloped in Absolution's light, he heard Tianxiu's cold voice pass through his mind like a gale sweeping across heaven and earth.

"How did it come to this?" the voice asked him.

When he heard these words of legend, the Feng patriarch still had a wisp of spiritual consciousness left. *To think that a fiend's reckoning would one day befall me*, he thought. *It seems that I…I have become a fiend.* Yet he had once been a young cultivation clan disciple brimming with aspirations to vanquish evil and slay fiends.

Under the reckoning of Tianxiu's sword, images of his life flashed by —

At twelve, he had a near-death experience, becoming one of the few to see the Arbor Divinus and live to tell the tale. He witnessed the enormous, cloudlike canopy of the towering tree growing on the mountain's peak. As blurry as it was, he remembered that it *did* resemble an apricot tree in full bloom.

The person he was then never imagined he would one day hide a pagoda in the Feng estate, embedded with fragmented pieces of that great tree.

At seventeen, he passed by the Barrows in its infancy. At the sight of those giant burial mounds, he mourned with a sigh, “Alas, here lie the valiant remains of those who fell on the battlefield in ages past…”

The person he was then never imagined he would one day drag the very remains he once lamented to his clan’s sanctuary and exploit them to pave a road.

At twenty, he began to distinguish himself, gaining enough minor fame to bring honor to his family. He heard of the evil spirits stirring up trouble in the areas around the Barrows and the nameless guardian who aided the nearby villagers. When he heard these stories, he hoped he might someday have the chance to meet that guardian.

The person he was then never imagined the guardian was the rogue cultivator who’d built his pagoda in the Barrows. He never imagined that he would not only meet the guardian, but he would be the culprit behind the man’s fateful energy deviation.

Becoming a celestial or a fiend, doing good or evil—it all seemed to hinge on a single moment.

Unlike many cultivators of the celestial path, he married almost as soon as he turned twenty. His cultivation mate was his childhood sweetheart. It was said that couples who knew one another since childhood shared the deepest affection, and it wasn’t long before they were expecting their first child. Tragically, that child died in the womb and never entered the world. He consoled his cultivation mate for a long time, explaining that it might have happened due to the contamination of infernal energy. Things would be fine moving forward.

Soon, they were once more expecting a child. That pregnancy, too, nearly resulted in a stillbirth. Fortunately, they managed to save the child—a boy. Due to the ordeal he'd endured while still in the womb, his constitution was somewhat weak. Regardless, what did that matter as long as the child survived?

Another year passed, and they soon had a second child. This time, they had a daughter. The daughter's birth went much more smoothly than the son's, and she was blessed with a fine constitution. She was gifted and clever as well.

People often said it was most auspicious to have both a son and a daughter. No one understood exactly how he felt in those years, just as no one knew how dearly he cherished those children. He practically worshiped them. He watched them grow up bit by bit, teaching them to speak, to read, and to wield a sword. He taught them everything he knew. Over the years, he put little effort into improving his own cultivation and instead poured his energy into being a dutiful, doting father.

Those around him often teased him for it, but whenever he heard such jests, he would simply smile and answer, "Let's just say I'm obsessed."

Unfortunately, he never got the chance to see his son and daughter into adulthood; they passed away at the age of twelve—the very same age he'd been when he'd hovered on the brink of death himself.

His cultivation mate pleaded for answers over and over again. "How could this be? I don't understand…"

But he understood. This was destiny taking a long, roundabout path to deliver his karmic retribution. He hadn't died when he should have, so now his descendants had died in his place.

He personally laid his son and daughter to rest in their coffins, and he never smiled again. The devoted, loving father was gone, leaving behind only a cultivator. By then, he was already trapped in his own obsessive thinking and fixated on undoing what had befallen his children—he just hadn't noticed it yet. He was in the prime of his life, so he focused exclusively on intense cultivation. He reached new heights that marked him as exceptional, not only within his own clan but among all cultivators in the mortal realm.

Over the years, his clan vanquished many evil creatures, aided a great number of people, and forged many benevolent connections. It was known that he was one of the few mortals to have seen the Arbor Divinus in a prior celestial encounter. As such, when the Arbor Divinus was sealed, his clan was appointed as guardian of the forbidden domain and given the surname "Feng." The Fengs were among the handful of mortals to have ever received a heavenly edict, but since their task involved a forbidden domain, they could not speak of it to outsiders. A duty that might have brought honor to their clan thus became a secret known only to the head or prospective head of the clan.

As leader, he alone knew this secret, and he alone was required to keep it.

It was the first time he'd experienced such a contradictory feeling. It felt like dressing up in the finest silks and brocades to walk alone through a desolate forest in the dead of night. It was also the first time he perceived that he wasn't a pure altruist. He clung to numerous worldly desires, especially his hunger for reciprocation and praise. He even felt brief, occasional flashes of indignation.

Because he'd died and lived again, he knew his life had been forcefully obtained, hence the price he had paid. He'd already done so much good with

his life, so why should it not be enough to even the score and allow him some happiness?

Destiny is unfair.

When this thought first crossed his mind, he suppressed it, never letting it show on his face. But as time passed—or perhaps because he spent so long in an elevated position and his cultivation had reached the zenith of the mortal realm—he indulged the thought when it came to him again.

He reminisced over everything he'd ever experienced in his life and went through each moment one by one to evaluate which were worthwhile and which were not. He began to believe he had gained too little in return for all his work and good deeds. This justified his resentment and discontent. From that day onward, he decided he had earned the right to bring his son and daughter back to life.

Once he made that decision, everything spiraled out of control. The words he'd uttered—*"Let's just say I'm obsessed"*—became a prophecy he fulfilled on that day, so many years later. In the middle of the night, he dug up his children's coffins, built a formation around them, and began to seek out every possible avenue to bring them back to life.

One night, while sitting in the Feng Clan's main hall, he had a strange dream in which someone told him: "That dream of yours… It's not impossible."

So thoughts by day really do become dreams by night, he thought.

"How can it be done?" Though he knew he was dreaming, he still asked the question.

The person who spoke to him was terribly blurry, and he could not see their face. He had no idea with whom he was speaking, but he referred to the other person as “Lord Immortal” anyway. Perhaps his days of running all over the place seeking help from anyone who would listen had given him the tendency to blurt out that title.

While he could not remember the voice or face of the person in his dream, he remembered the two paths that had been pointed out to him.

Down one path, he could seek out his spiritual guardian, a little girl who had died tragically in her past life. Weighed down with a grudge from the moment she’d been born, she had lost both her parents at a young age. If he took in this orphan girl as his daughter, resolved the grudge in her fate, and helped her to accumulate merit, he might have a chance to reunite with his son and daughter one day. “Lord Immortal” did not elaborate regarding the other path, putting it to him quite simply:

“If you cannot transcend their loss, then go back and trade your life for theirs.”

In the mad, obsessive years that followed, he sometimes thought he was delusional to put his faith in that dream. In fact, he did not take the dream seriously until the day he met a skinny little dirt-covered girl in front of an old, abandoned shrine to the god of rites.

The little girl trembled like a frightened bird and clearly had no home to return to. He stared at her for a moment in shock. Then, as if driven by supernatural impulse, he divined her soul and discovered that it indeed carried a grudge. He cast a spell to search through her past life and saw hints that it had been extremely short—parents killed by an enemy, her family in ruins, no one left to protect her. Destitute and adrift, she had eventually been

kidnapped to become a ghost bride; they'd even dug out her eyes. Just after her death, the little ghost girl had knelt in a shrine to the god of rites to pray for divine retribution.

Here was an orphan girl with a grudge who'd died a tragic death in a previous life. It all aligned with what he'd heard in his dream.

From then on, he clung to the path shown to him by his dream's "Lord Immortal" like grass growing at the edge of a cliff held on for dear life. He took her back to the Feng Clan, adopted her as his daughter, and named her Feng Shulan. He had not smiled since his children passed away, and he had forgotten how to be a loving father, so he didn't dote on her. He preferred to avoid the sight of her lest she remind him of his late daughter. As a result, he and Feng Shulan were never close. Still, he provided everything he could for her, save love and affection. She lived a life free from want and enjoyed a fine upbringing. Everyone said he had once again been blessed with a daughter like a fine pearl.

He waited and waited and watched as Feng Shulan grew up and came into her own. He watched as she developed the bearing of a future clan leader and became a paragon among her peers. But the chance mentioned in his dream never came, and he saw no trace of reclaiming the children he still thought of day and night.

Growing more restless and anxious by the day, he finally regretted his choice. In his dream, the Lord Immortal had pointed out two paths. He'd tried following the first, but he had lost all patience and refused to wait any longer. It was time to consider the second. Unfortunately, the Lord Immortal had given him no hint beyond that one short sentence.

"If you cannot transcend their loss, then go back and trade your life for theirs."

He repeated it to himself until he seized on two key phrases: "go back" and "trade life."

Trading lives was extremely difficult and violated the natural order—and going back was even harder. But the Feng Clan differed from the rest of the world in one important way. They guarded a secret: the Arbor Divinus. Using the power of the Arbor Divinus, he *could* go back. Was he not the man who guarded the place where the Arbor Divinus was sealed?

By this time, he was bordering on madness, so he considered this coincidence a stroke of extraordinarily good fortune.

He stole surreptitiously into the forbidden domain and began to commit "embezzlement." He spared no thought for the consequences of barging into that place. He did not care what might happen if he disturbed something, whether it triggered a second sealing or something far worse. He thought of nothing but going back.

One day, he succeeded.

Since the life-trade arts required a path paved with countless souls of the dead, he traveled back to the distant past, years before the Arbor Divinus was sealed. He journeyed to the Barrows, where souls were most abundant, only to find that it had a guardian. The guardian had striking features and appeared young, but he was no less accomplished in cultivation than the patriarch. In fact, he was so accomplished that the patriarch stood no chance in a fair fight, so he instead set a trap.

One night in the Barrows, the patriarch set an arcane formation. Other than corpses, the area's most abundant resource was crushed rock, making

keystones hidden among the debris difficult to spot. Moreover, his subtle formation was capable of exerting a gradual influence throughout the area over time.

According to folk wisdom, spectators get a better view than players—and the guardian was now a player.

Because his son and daughter had died in his place, the patriarch had originally planned to exchange his life for theirs, but when the crucial moment arrived, he changed his mind. There were so many people in the Feng Clan, and he was its patriarch. If he lost his life, turmoil would inevitably ensue. His death was a losing proposition. He told himself many excuses until, in the end, he sealed the scores of souls he'd gathered from the Barrows, imprisoned them alongside his children's coffins in the Feng Clan's sanctuary, and decided to seek someone whose life he could offer as the final sacrifice.

After a long search, he found a child with a life chart similar to his own and adopted him as his son. When he led the boy through the Feng Clan's gates, he thought, *This child is going to die either way. If I don't take him in, he won't survive more than a few days. I'll take good care of him, and he'll repay that kindness. It's fair*.

He intended to raise only Feng Huiming until he could be used for the life-trade, but one day, he stumbled across the girl who would become Feng Shulan in the wilderness. This time, he had no need for her. He walked away—but it wasn't long before he trekked back.

He reached out to examine her soul and noticed some changes in her past life. Instead of lingering in the abandoned shrine of rites, she'd entered the wheel of reincarnation as soon as she'd died. That was why he'd

encountered her now, several years earlier than in his previous lifetime. He hesitated, but he ended up bringing the little girl back to the Feng Clan. Again, he adopted her as his daughter, and again, he gave her the name Feng Shulan.

He remained distant from Feng Shulan and barely saw her. He couldn't understand why he felt compelled to raise this child he had no use for; it almost made him wonder whether some trace of untarnished goodness still lingered inside of him.

Once, while he was deep in thought behind closed doors, he asked himself this question again. After much thought, he arrived at an answer.

As long as this little girl is here, I'm still half of a good person.

The patriarch had often repeated those words to himself, as though saying it enough might have made it true: *I'm still half of a good person.* Now, run through by Feng Huiming's vital move and subjected to a reckoning from the Tianxiu Immortal, the patriarch's soul shuddered with a powerful realization: From the moment he'd adopted that mantra, that "half of a good person" had ceased to exist.

As his consciousness faded, the people he'd met in his life flashed through his mind.

He thought this would include the son and daughter for whom he would have sacrificed his life, but oddly, he did not see them.

Instead, he saw Feng Huiming's bloodshot eyes as he said, *"I'm satisfied."*

He saw Feng Shulan, who never called him "Father," only "Master."

He saw the countless burial mounds he'd noticed when he'd first passed by the Barrows—and he saw the guardian whose soul had fractured so utterly that it'd become untraceable when he'd died.

The patriarch wondered whether it was another kind of divine retribution to spend his last moments alive thinking only of those he'd harmed.

Wu Xingxue watched the images drawn out by the reckoning as they flashed by. When he saw the massive burial mounds of the Barrows, he could not help but think of those timelines he'd severed. He could almost smell the ever-present fog hanging in the air and see the swaying of the guardian's lantern as he patrolled. He could almost hear the murdered initiates' whispers as they conversed and feel the rustling of the dead like wind beneath the burial mounds.

He stood stiffly for a moment before he was struck by a thought that drew his brows together: When he'd received heavenly edicts, they'd often brought him to a past node in time from which he cut away the aberrant timelines. When he'd cut the timelines in the Barrows, he'd returned to a time that was even earlier than usual—the Arbor Divinus hadn't yet been sealed, Urbs Caelestia had not yet occupied the skies above, and the Tianxiu Immortal had yet to be invoked. So how could Xiao Fuxuan have seen him there?

Wu Xingxue snatched the wrist of the man standing beside him. His fingers tightened as he looked into Xiao Fuxuan's eyes, his voice so soft that it bordered on a whisper.

"Xiao Fuxuan, you said you saw me in the Barrows. Who were you?"

Which one of them was you?

The young general had died while protecting the Arbor Divinus. Under the force of the heavenly tribulation, his soul was shattered into fragments, leaving him unable to enter the wheel of reincarnation whole. Where his blood flowed, jadehaem grew. The bones from his past, present, and future incarnations were all buried in the Barrows, while his soul shards, which even the Arbor Divinus would struggle to identify, ended up in unfamiliar shells. Through the unseen workings of fate, every shell that bore one of his soul shards eventually entered the Barrows.

Xiao Fuxuan had no knowledge of these past entanglements. All he knew was that this life of his had originated from countless shards. He had no root, no source, no place where he belonged. He watched as fragmented joys and sorrows unfolded from inside many different shells. He was the rogue cultivator who became the guardian, carrying a lantern as he patrolled the night; he was the disciples with menace in their life charts that the guardian took in; he was the souls asleep beneath the giant burial mounds. In the Barrows, adrift in the cold fog that never lifted, he lingered for many, many years until the day the masked Rex Spiritus emerged from the fog.

Through lives and deaths untold, in countless branching timelines, he remembered Rex Spiritus's every appearance, remembered watching him sever every timeline, until Xiao Fuxuan could recognize him by the sight of his back alone.

Now, as Wu Xingxue stood before him and asked which one of them he'd been, he still did not know how to answer. He leaned over Wu Xingxue and lingered there a long time before he touched the corner of Wu Xingxue's lips.

Who was I? I was so many of them. You walked into the fog of the Barrows countless times.

You slew me, saved me, fixed your eyes upon me, and passed me by.

Chapter 61:
Lies

OF THE MANY RUMORS that came later, the Tianxiu Immortal's origins had always been shrouded in mystery, as if he had materialized into the world out of thin air.

For once, the rumors were correct.

His soul had been attached to many shells. Each one of them was him, and at the same time, none were. He witnessed life's impermanence and its joys, sorrows, outrages, and grief through the eyes of both players and spectators. The burning passions of ordinary men became cold detachment as they reached him. After all, when a storm raged in one distant corner of the Boundless Sea, most of its vast surface remained calm and undisturbed.

Xiao Fuxuan was dispassionate and free of longing, until the day the many different shells he'd inhabited came upon that person again. In that moment, as if a dormant spirit had opened its eyes, his divided emotions coalesced and became complete.

For each aberrant timeline severed in the Barrows, for each shell annihilated, a soul fragment departed. When the final timeline was severed, Xiao Fuxuan came into the world.

As the very last shard was released from its shell, Xiao Fuxuan stood among the countless souls of the Barrows and called out to the masked man, "Who are you?"

But the clamoring voices of the dead were so numerous they drowned out his question, and the other man did not hear.

Three years after Xiao Fuxuan had been invoked to become an immortal and first set foot in Urbs Caelestia, he overheard someone describe a celestial who donned a silver-filigreed mask whenever he fulfilled a heavenly edict that sent him to the mortal realm.

Xiao Fuxuan, who'd just grabbed his sword and been about to take his leave, stopped as soon as he heard these words. The startled celestial emissaries thought they'd said something wrong.

Xiao Fuxuan remembered the celestial's title: Rex Spiritus, who'd been bestowed with the courtesy name Zhao.

Many in Urbs Caelestia were curious about what Rex Spiritus did when he descended to the mortal realm. While Xiao Fuxuan had not yet met Rex Spiritus, he became the first to know the answer to this question, if only because he'd once witnessed it himself. When Rex Spiritus received a heavenly edict, he traveled into the past to sever certain timelines. This was how, in a rather peculiar way, past Xiao Fuxuan met future Rex Spiritus.

Over time, Xiao Fuxuan noticed he heard that title all the time: Rex Spiritus, Rex Spiritus, Rex Spiritus. The Spirit Terrace talked about him, the emissaries talked about him, the Rites Bureau talked about him, every celestial he passed on the street talked about him. They said Rex Spiritus wasn't always in Urbs Caelestia; they said Rex Spiritus often went to the mortal realm. He would walk right past these people, hand on his sword, expression unchanged, footsteps never slowing, but he listened closely to their every word.

It dawned on him that, though he had a deep and cherished connection to the masked man who'd visited the Barrows, he was to Rex Spiritus one small part of the near-infinite timelines he'd severed, no different than

anyone else. Xiao Fuxuan couldn't possibly have left any impression on someone like him. When he considered this, a delicate and tangled feeling spread through his heart.

He felt this often thereafter, and always over the same person. Most of the time, he hid it quite well, but on rare occasions, Rex Spiritus seemed to catch a glimmer of it on his face. Then, Rex Spiritus would offer Xiao Fuxuan a mischievous grin and ask, "Lord Tianxiu, are you displeased?"

Rex Spiritus rarely displayed that grin in front of others, so Xiao Fuxuan's mood improved each time he saw it. Still, he would maintain a look of displeasure on his face a little while longer to give Rex Spiritus more time to gloat.

Xiao Fuxuan spent a long time hoping that Rex Spiritus would remember he'd overlooked their original connection and they'd met long ago. In the scenario he envisioned, the epiphany would strike in either the Seat of Spring Breeze or Southsill Overlook. They would be sitting side by side atop the eaves or by the window, drinking wine on a carpet of fallen petals, serene. Suddenly, Rex Spiritus's expression would register astonishment, bewilderment, perhaps a hint of chagrin, and then he would offer to make it up to Xiao Fuxuan somehow…

Xiao Fuxuan had never guessed the moment would unfold in a setting like this one. He gazed at Wu Xingxue's pale fingers gripping his wrist, then looked into his eyes. He thought of Rex Spiritus's figure standing silently in the fog of the Barrows, sword in hand—and suddenly, Xiao Fuxuan no longer wanted him to remember. His thumb brushed the corner of Wu Xingxue's pursed lips, and he sent an etheric whisper through his vital force.

‹Who do you remember?›

Xiao Fuxuan was grateful that he could perceive what Wu Xingxue was thinking, while Wu Xingxue could only hear the messages Xiao Fuxuan intended to send.

‹A lot of people—the ones I killed, the ones I watched die. Actually, I remember them all…› Wu Xingxue said.

So he did recall everything. Xiao Fuxuan hadn't expected that.

‹None of them were me,› he heard himself say.

‹Really?›

‹Mm-hmm. Really.›

The Tianxiu Immortal never lied, but when it came to Rex Spiritus, he was forever making exceptions.

Wu Xingxue stared into Xiao Fuxuan's eyes. Slowly, an ache spread through Wu Xingxue's fingers. Only the sting of pain told him how hard he'd grabbed Xiao Fuxuan's wrist.

Thank goodness, Wu Xingxue thought. *Thank goodness Xiao Fuxuan wasn't any of them…* He relaxed his grip, and the color in his fingers returned a little. He let out an imperceptible sigh of relief. Still, he wasn't completely at ease.

‹Then, where were you?› he asked Xiao Fuxuan. *‹I don't remember any other living people in the Barrows…›*

‹Not the living.›

That gave Wu Xingxue pause. *‹If not the living, then what?›*

‹Whatever there was in the Barrows, that's what I was.›

Wu Xingxue immediately thought of the dead. It was true that those buried in the Barrows came from the battlefield, yet…

Xiao Fuxuan continued before Wu Xingxue could finish the thought. *‹I don't know how my soul ended up there, but I know that what you did back then brought deliverance to some of the lost souls.›*

Wu Xingxue took that in. *‹Deliverance?›*

‹Mm-hmm.›

For a long time, whenever Rex Spiritus had thought of the Barrows, he'd lapsed into a profound silence. It was a reflex that even the clamor of the Mount Blossomfell Bazaar could not alter—not until this very moment.

Xiao Fuxuan's vital force enveloped Wu Xingxue's heart completely, and he heard his voice echo with rich resonance.

‹You saved a lot of people,› said Xiao Fuxuan.

‹I saved a lot of people…?› Wu Xingxue blinked.

‹You brought deliverance to many, and I was one of them. I even said something to you once.›

‹What did you say?› Wu Xingxue asked, dazed.

‹You probably don't remember, but before you left, I asked, "Who are you?"›

That sent a shock through Wu Xingxue. *‹I do remember,›* he said gently.

He really did—the voice had been difficult to make out, drowned as it'd been beneath the many piercing wails and cries of the dead, but he remembered hearing those words. The muffled, barely audible words

suddenly became the most solid, undeniable proof. The very instant he'd heard Xiao Fuxuan repeat them, Wu Xingxue had calmed.

Thanks to a handful of words, Wu Xingxue found he could finally endure the memories of the Barrows. He was struck by the urge to call out his name, and so he did:

"Xiao Fuxuan."

Before he could say anything further, the entire Feng pagoda shook with such force that he almost lost his footing.

Caught off guard, Ning Huaishan started, stumbled two steps back, and nearly collided with his archon.

"Oh shit!" He was horrified but unable to fight his momentum, so he closed his eyes. *Guess I'll just die*, he thought, only to feel a gust of wind blast into his face and stop him. It was like he'd struck an invisible wall with his nose. After he smacked into the wind barrier, he opened one eye to find himself a half step away from his archon, unable to advance another inch.

Xiao Fuxuan looked down at him, his face blank.

Ning Huaishan was full of questions. Seeing Tianxiu's hand lingering on the side of his archon's face, those questions only multiplied. The words *What's wrong with this pagoda?!* stuck in his throat. After a brief struggle, he swallowed them altogether. He pressed his hands to the wind wall and took two steps back. Then the pagoda rocked several times more, pitching Ning Huaishan forward to once more smack into the wind wall.

"God dam—" He bit off the profanity but could not stop himself from yelling into the supernatural wind, "Is this whole place coming down or something? Is that why it's shaking so hard?!"

At first, Wu Xingxue also thought the pagoda was about to collapse, destroying the Feng estate's sanctuary once and for all. As the scene before him blurred and overlapped, he realized with a jolt that this was something else entirely. The pagoda and the sanctuary weren't the problem.

‹It's the entire past,› said Xiao Fuxuan, frowning.

Wu Xingxue recognized it as well. The current timeline only existed due to the actions of the Feng patriarch. Now, the timeline was disappearing, causing the area around them to distort. Did the fiendish Wu Xingxue have Rex Spiritus's power to pull aberrant timelines onto the rightful path? Even if he did, this collapse was still bizarre, because he hadn't *done* anything yet. Could an aberrant timeline collapse on its own?

Impossible, Wu Xingxue thought. If it could, what need would there be for someone like Rex Spiritus? That meant this branch of the timeline was not just collapsing, and the present disturbance stemmed from something other than the entanglement of different timelines.

The timeline wanted to cast them out and return them to their core timeline before it could be severed. Of course, a timeline could not "want" anything—desire was a feeling exclusive to people, which meant that *someone* wanted to preserve this timeline. Whoever that someone was, they'd left a trap that would drive out any intruders who triggered it before it concealed itself again.

Wu Xingxue had clearly wondered about this problem before. Several centuries ago, he'd visited this timeline and both Mount Blossomfell Bazaar and the Feng estate. So, why hadn't he cut it down then? His past self must have encountered the same trap. As though confirming his hypothesis, the image before him began to blur again.

The reckoning had just ended. Xiao Fuxuan's Sword of Absolution still hummed. The Feng patriarch's soul trembled. The light inside Feng Huiming's eyes was dying out as thousands of souls of the long dead wailed and struggled to escape their confinement. The two black coffins creaked.

Without warning, a bout of unspeakable pain came over Wu Xingxue. It felt like two separate forces had seized him, one on each side. They began to tear him apart.

As the agony overwhelmed him, it felt strangely familiar. This was the pain of being rent between the past and the present. He'd experienced it often when he'd still been Rex Spiritus, but back then he'd traveled freely between aberrant timelines and the core one, and any discomfort had passed in an instant. He'd never paid it any mind. This time, it was *so* different, cyclical and prolonged, and almost more than he could stand.

He let out a self-deprecating laugh. It would've been better if his five senses had stayed numb. Lacking his senses was like being cut with a dull blade; it was painful but bearable, and his mind remained lucid. Now look at him.

Makes it seem like I can't handle pain or something. At least I'm still an archfiend…

Overwhelmed by the onslaught, he began to lose consciousness. As his vision faded to black, someone caught him in a gentle, heated embrace.

Bonus Story:
The Scroll of Heaven and Earth

IN THE SOUTHWEST HINTERLANDS, a form of puppet magic once flourished. The art was hardly refined and regarded as folk magic at best, part exaggeration and part sleight of hand. Whether it worked largely depended on the spellcaster's spiritual reservoir.

Disciples of proper cultivation clans considered such backwoods magic beneath them. Over the centuries, each well-established clan developed its own unique set of systematic cultivation techniques, and they did not tolerate outside influences. It was a small thing if the magic proved ineffective, but what if it induced a clash among the five elements and energy deviation in the caster? The clan would become a laughingstock if that happened. Thus, for cultivators, folk magic was akin to juggling and parlor tricks, not a source of pride. Presumably, this was doubly true for the immortals of Urbs Caelestia.

In reality, the celestials weren't that opposed to backwoods magic. Some, including Rex Spiritus, were even interested in it.

Rex Spiritus loved to roam, so he rarely stayed in his official residence for long. During his frequent trips to the mortal realm, he was allegedly captivated by any fascinating new magic he came across. It was said that he sometimes stopped to watch and inquire about these techniques, and that he even began to learn some of them on the spot. However, since the only celestial in Urbs Caelestia who ever accompanied Rex Spiritus was Lord Tianxiu, the veracity of these claims remained unknown. No one was about to approach Tianxiu to shoot the breeze and casually verify the truth.

The rumors were, in fact, quite accurate. Rex Spiritus had come into being on Blossomfell Terrace, manifested from the Arbor Divinus that spanned life and death. Before he gained his human aspect, he spent a thousand years watching the bustle of humankind through the branches of the Arbor Divinus. Since Blossomfell Terrace was one of the most renowned locations in the mortal realm, it brought together countless travelers from every corner of the world. From those branches, Rex Spiritus had often heard about folk legends and magic, so he accepted them without a second thought.

It all began the day the Seat of Spring Breeze's two pageboys decided to turn terrifyingly diligent. With their high topknots and small statures, they resembled a couple of spinning tops as they ran in and out, insistent on cleaning an estate that never gathered dust in the first place. To make their task easier, the two little spinning tops asked Lord Rex Spiritus to leave his bed and move to the courtyard to take in the scenery for a while.

Rex Spiritus obliged, which was how he found himself standing in the courtyard's covered corridor, wrapped in a set of thin garments, with many questions on his mind. As one pageboy ran by with a duster in his hand, Rex Spiritus grabbed ahold of his topknot.

"What are you two up to? Why are you dusting all of a sudden, and what is there to dust in my Seat of Spring Breeze anyway?"

The pageboy, who was usually *much* more laid-back, bowed to him. "To answer my lord, even if there's no dust, one must regularly tidy up regardless. After all, it's one of our responsibilities."

Rex Spiritus blinked. *I wonder if they ate something cursed by mistake.*

He touched the top of the pageboy's head to check for any sign of possession, and as he did, he spotted the other pageboy bent over as he

cleaned the windowsill.

"If you can't find any dust to clean, your job is done. Why are you sweeping away the fallen petals? I left them there on purpose." Exasperated, Rex Spiritus crooked a finger, and an invisible force lifted the pageboy and set him down again in the courtyard. "Did you get a lecture at Southsill Overlook or something? Now you want to clear the spring fog and sweep away the fallen petals regardless of their charms," he said, flicking the pageboy on the forehead.

"Ouch!" The pageboy rubbed his forehead and prepared to bow and say, *To answer my lord…* again, but his lord put a hand on his forehead and stopped him.

"Talk like a normal person," Rex Spiritus said.

"Oh."

"Why don't you tell me what happened to the two of you?"

The two pageboys scratched their heads and said, "When we were passing the Rites Bureau yesterday, Lord Sang Feng was really bored, so he pulled the two of us over to chat with him for a while."

Rex Spiritus rolled his eyes. Sang Feng must have really been hard up for someone to talk to if he'd chosen these two. "All right, so he wanted to chat. What did you chat about?"

"A little bit of everything." The pageboy earnestly counted out the topics on his fingers as he spoke. "He talked about what he used to do, and how he got the opportunity to join the Rites Bureau, and how he hadn't been to the mortal realm for a long time, and how he'd managed to find so many things he'd never seen before when he went there. And then he said there was

some kind of puppet magic that used to be popular in the southwest regions, and it could turn anyone into a puppet without their knowledge. The puppets are completely under the control of the spellcaster, who can make them do whatever he wants—like if he said to go east, the puppet couldn't go west, and if he said to go west, the puppet couldn't go east."

Rex Spiritus was perplexed. There was nothing wrong with what Sang Feng had said, but it didn't explain why the two boys had started compulsively cleaning and bowing as soon as they returned.

The pageboy continued, his voice growing soft and eerie. "Apparently, if the puppet is disobedient, it'll grow a bunch of heads and arms and legs while it sleeps at night, and when it wakes up and looks in the mirror…"

The little ones sure know how to set the mood, thought Rex Spiritus. *They're even acting now!*

"Boo!" The two boys shuddered and sucked in a breath in unison as if they'd experienced this horror firsthand. "It's so scary!"

"Setting aside for a minute whether any of that is true, what do scary puppets have to do with you two?" Rex Spiritus asked doubtfully.

"Plenty!" answered one pageboy. He fidgeted with his fingers. "Lord Sang Feng said that everyone in the southwest region knows a bit of this magic, and they use it to discipline naughty children."

"That's right," the other pageboy said. "And, um, well, Lord Sang Feng even said that you, my lord, know a lot of stuff—and maybe that includes puppet magic from the southwest too."

Rex Spiritus looked at them and shook his head. "*That's* what's been keeping you two so industrious?"

Sure enough, the two pageboys turned their faces up at him and asked in unison, “My lord, we’re being awfully good right now, aren’t we?”

Rex Spiritus didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Have I ever said that you two were not good?”

The pageboys gave this some thought. “You’ve…hinted.”

Oh, I’ve hinted. “And what exactly have I hinted?”

“My lord, last time you said we were sabotaging you. You said we let our mouths get ahead of our brains.”

Rex Spiritus raised an eyebrow.

The pageboys fidgeted again.

“The more we thought about it last night, the more scared we got. We couldn’t sleep all night!”

“When we woke up this morning, we thought we’d better work a bit harder to, you know, make up for it.”

Rex Spiritus leaned closer to get a better look at each pageboy’s face and noticed the dark shadows under their eyes. Urbs Caelestia’s emissaries and pageboys were usually brimming with vital energy, and they didn’t need to rest every day. They certainly shouldn’t have dark circles under their eyes from a single night of poor sleep, so theirs must have been caused by excessive worry.

“You’re really that scared, huh?” Rex Spiritus asked. “You two have never seemed this afraid of fiends and ghouls and such.”

The two pageboys looked at each other.

“The scary part is that it’s ugly. We don’t want to be ugly!”

Rex Spiritus couldn't help but smile. He'd intended at first to tell the two pageboys not to take Sang Feng's tales so seriously and just be their usual selves. There was no need to act so industrious and polite. Frankly, it was kind of creepy. Alas, the two little ones were far too emotionally invested and unlikely to let it go anytime soon. He thought over what to do next.

"How about this? Why don't I show you how puppet magic is actually done?"

"You really know how to do it, my lord?" The pageboys were taken aback.

"Sure," Rex Spiritus said with a smile. "There are quite a few different kinds of puppet magic circulating in the mortal realm, but what Sang Feng described sounds like one of the two kinds I've seen before. For this kind of puppet magic, we must first choose a shell."

The pageboys fell silent, the color draining from their faces. Rex Spiritus had intended to let them experience it for themselves; he knew exactly how far to take the spell without hurting a hair on their heads. Watching them huddle together in fear, he changed his mind.

"Oh, forget it, I'll just make one." He took them inside to demonstrate.

When it came to spiritual power and divinity, no one in Urbs Caelestia rivaled Rex Spiritus. Making a shell was easy for him—just a few folds with a sheet of joss paper. He thought to fold a pageboy, which would've been simple, but he worried the little ones might think he was "hinting" at something again. Instead, his slender fingers held the joss paper, folded, pressed down, then let it go. White light enveloped the paper as it hit the ground, and in a flash, the paper transformed into a person: an exceptionally

tall man with striking, handsome features, like a dazzling sword sheathed in white jade.

The two pageboys were so surprised they jumped back. “Whoa! Lord Tianxiu?!”

Rex Spiritus silently stared at his own fingers and muttered something under his breath.

The two pageboys ooh-ed and ahh-ed as they walked in circles around the person their lord had made. One moment they were admiring the subtle golden embroidery on his belt, and the next they were standing on tiptoe trying to read the name emblazoned on his neck as they clicked their tongues in amazement.

“You’re incredible, my lord! It looks exactly like Lord Tianxiu. Even his sword seems to have spiritual powers!”

This was what it was like trying to craft a physical shell. The more familiar the maker was with someone, the more precisely they could recreate an accurate duplicate. The best ones resembled the genuine article down to the smallest detail, and even the person being recreated would struggle to tell the difference. The duplicate Tianxiu seemed so like the original that the pageboys were reluctant to touch it, though they knew it was just a shell. They settled for circling it and inspecting it like nervous birds.

Rex Spiritus waited for them to look their fill. Right as he lifted his hand to continue his demonstration of puppet magic, he heard voices coming from beyond the Seat of Spring Breeze’s gates. Visitors had arrived.

What a time for company, Rex Spiritus thought. He was about to call out and invite the visitor right in but reconsidered when he realized the

Tianxiu shell in his rooms might frighten someone. He turned to the pageboys. “You two hold down the fort here. I’ll go check the front gate.”

In a departure from custom, Lord Rex Spiritus went to greet his visitor at the gates to his residence himself. There, he discovered that he had two guests: none other than the Rites Bureau’s Sang Feng and Meng Gu.

Meng Gu charged ahead at a fiery pace, and Rex Spiritus could hear her long before she reached the door. She curtsied from a distance and launched into a speech. “Sang Feng told me that he ran off at the mouth yesterday and frightened your pageboys. Apparently, they looked rather stricken when they left, so I brought him here to apologize.”

“Oh, ah, dear me, I really did have too much free time yesterday,” said Sang Feng. His deep bow seemed genuinely remorseful. “I only meant to tease the two little ones a bit, but I seem to have gone overboard. Lord Rex Spiritus, please do forgive me.”

Unbeknownst to Rex Spiritus, while he conversed with the two visitors from the Rites Bureau at the gates to the Seat of Spring Breeze, a third visitor landed directly inside his courtyard, drew the door curtain aside with his sword, and entered. Just as Rex Spiritus could come and go freely from Southsill Overlook, Lord Tianxiu had the privilege to visit the Seat of Spring Breeze without announcing his presence. Thus, he passed right through the door to come face to face with…himself.

The pageboys got a huge shock, and they immediately turned around to tell their lord that the real Tianxiu was here. However, the moment they opened their mouths, a vital force tinged with sword aura poured into them. Their lips puckered, and they found they could no longer speak. They tried to

grunt, only to realize that even their voices were gone. Their lips remained squeezed tight as they spun back to face Lord Tianxiu.

He regarded the shell that looked identical to himself. Without a flicker of his lips, he sent his voice directly into the pageboys' heads.

‹What is he trying to do?› Xiao Fuxuan asked. Naturally, the unspecified "he" referred to Rex Spiritus.

The pageboys shook their heads so furiously their bodies shook too.

‹No need to make a sound,› Tianxiu explained. *‹Just think the words and I'll hear them.›*

‹Our lord was just demonstrating puppet magic for us!›

‹And he was using me for that?›

There was a long pause before the pageboys squeaked, *‹Yes.›*

With his sword in one hand, Tianxiu raised an eyebrow.

Rex Spiritus bid his two guests from the Rites Bureau farewell and stepped back inside. His two pageboys were holding their dusters just as he'd left them, well-behaved and quiet. The Tianxiu shell also stood where he'd left it, sword in hand, waiting for life to be breathed into it. Everything was exactly the same as before he'd left. The only notable difference was that both pageboys had their lips tightly puckered, and neither was talking.

Rex Spiritus gave the topknots on their heads a little squeeze. "What's wrong? Are you upset because you had to wait too long?"

The pageboys kept their lips shut tight but shook their heads like pellet drums with all their might, as if to say, *We'd never dare.*

Rex Spiritus was amused. "Lord Sang Feng just came by to apologize for telling you two those stories. Seems like you two have quite a bit of

clout."

The pageboys shook their heads again, this time as if to say, *Very little clout. So little.*

"Well then, it looks like you're not so afraid anymore." Rex Spiritus turned to the Tianxiu shell. "Still, I already made this shell and can't turn him back into paper just yet, so how about I keep teaching you about puppet magic?" As he spoke, he reached a hand toward Tianxiu.

The pageboys were in such a panic they were practically jumping up and down, and their eyes nearly crossed. Alas, their lips remained sealed, and after trying mightily to push out a warning, all they each managed was a feeble "Mm-hmm" that made it sound like they could hardly wait. They were so incensed they just about fell over backward. In the end, since all their struggling had gotten them nowhere, they simply gave up.

Rex Spiritus took one of Tianxiu's hands and loosened his gold-inlaid black bracers a little. He slid his thumb from the base of the wrist up about a finger's length and pressed down on a specific spot along the inside of the forearm. Then, he turned to the pageboys.

"There are usually three spiritual apertures on a puppet: the center of the forehead, the middle of the chest, and the left wrist, which is connected to the heart. The forehead and chest are life gates—weaknesses, that is—so if you're not careful, your puppet won't work and you'll end up ruining the shell as well. As such, the most commonly used aperture is the wrist.

"Stories about the living beings captured and made into puppets allude to dark sorcery. If I told you about *that*, you'd just end up losing more sleep, so I'll spare you the details. Trust me. I'll only tell you about puppets that are created. There's no soul in these shells—they're completely empty. These

kinds of shells are the most useful. All you have to do is pinch the center of the wrist, pour your spiritual consciousness into it, and you've made yourself a puppet."

Rex Spiritus pressed down with his thumb, and the vast reserves of spiritual power available only to him poured from his fingers. Still, no matter how boundless his sea of power was, when he passed it on it flowed with the lightness of a stream slipping through a forest or a spring breeze brushing one's face.

"If it's the shell of someone notable, then it's quite a score. When you take it out with you, it's both obedient and impressive," Rex Spiritus said jokingly. Suddenly, he felt the vein on Tianxiu's wrist pulse, and the fingers that had been at rest bent and cradled his hand. In an instant, Rex Spiritus knew he'd made this shell far too authentic. It wasn't just his height, his appearance, or the clothes he wore—even the shell's body heat and the touch of his fingers felt exactly like the original. For a fleeting moment, Rex Spiritus felt disoriented. His voice broke off as he looked up.

Tianxiu's once-closed eyes had opened. He was looking softly down at him.

Rex Spiritus pursed his lips as he considered Tianxiu for a moment, then his eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. Finally, he tipped his head to one side and asked his newly made "puppet" a question.

"Are you obedient?"

At first, the puppet did not make a sound, his gaze lingering on Rex Spiritus's face as if considering how to answer his question. At last, he spoke in a low, dark tone. "I can be."

Near the end of the day, Sang Feng of the Rites Bureau returned to the Seat of Spring Breeze with a small apology gift. He found the gates to Rex Spiritus's official estate thrown wide open and its two pageboys sprawled over the windowsill, one on each side. Their chins in their hands, they sighed and stared into space. Sang Feng was amused but did not barge in. Instead, he stood beyond the estate's high threshold and knocked on the jade gates.

"Where is Lord Rex Spiritus? Why are you two all alone in this big place?"

The pageboys let out another loud sigh.

"Our lord made Lord Tianxiu into a puppet and took him down to the mortal realm to play," one said.

Sang Feng was just about to put his foot over the threshold when he heard those words. They sent such a shock through him that he nearly tripped, and it was only by grabbing hold of the pillar that he avoided sweeping the floor with his face.

"*Where* did your lord go? Who made *who* into a puppet?" Sang Feng asked. His usually warm and deep voice raised several octaves.

The pageboys, doing their very best to act well-behaved, repeated all that they'd just said verbatim, exactly as Sang Feng had requested. "Our lord made Lord Tianxiu into a puppet and took him down to the mortal realm to play."

Sang Feng received this information in silence. He felt as if he'd heard something incredible while simultaneously not understanding a single word. Then again, this concerned Rex Spiritus and Tianxiu, the two most elusive and enigmatic figures in all of Urbs Caelestia, so it was hardly something he

could hope to comprehend. Thus, without raising another question, he set down his token of apology, said his farewells, and left.

After Sang Feng departed, the pageboys remained sprawled on the windowsill, chins in their hands, occasionally letting a short exclamation or a long sigh.

"Is making a puppet supposed to be fun?" one of them wondered aloud. "Lord Tianxiu didn't seem like he was going to let on that he's not a puppet at all."

The other pageboy looked worried. "No idea. In any case, our lord sure is having a great time. Do you think he knows the puppet is actually the real Tianxiu?"

Rex Spiritus was remarkably clever—of course he knew. He'd noticed it the moment the "puppet" opened its eyes. While the pageboys lounged in the Seat of Spring Breeze worrying over their lord, Rex Spiritus and Tianxiu passed through a city somewhere in the mortal realm. Upon leaving the city, they reached a fork in the road. Glancing left and right, Rex Spiritus chose the one shrouded in fog and walked that way without a second thought.

Tianxiu tried to stop him. "This path is humid and thick with miasma. Didn't you say you had a headache the other day?"

Rex Spiritus twirled the silver-filigreed sword in his hand as he turned and took several steps backward. "Oh, but aren't you a puppet?" he said with a tilt of his head. "A puppet doesn't guide its master."

Lord Tianxiu raised an eyebrow and kept his voice low. "And did you not see through that with a single glance?"

Rex Spiritus was the very face of innocence. “Nonsense. Did I not see through what? I’ve noticed nothing at all. Since you’re a puppet, just behave for one day and do as you’re told. The rumors said puppets are perfectly obedient. If you tell it to go east, it would never go west.”

Tianxiu stared at him.

“Fine,” he agreed at last. He followed Rex Spiritus into the mist.

The gray-white fog enveloped them, and the further into the mountains they traveled, the thicker it grew. Finally, even the path directly in front of them became difficult to discern. People described the southwest area as full of mountains, rivers, and remote temples, a description that was vividly embodied here. Shrouded in mist, the shadowy silhouettes of temples dotted the mountains around them as far as the eyes could see—here, an eave; there, the roof of a pagoda. This wasn’t something one saw near Reverie, and it was quite striking at first glance.

Tianxiu originally assumed that Rex Spiritus had come to this place specifically to see its three hundred mountain temples, yet once they were on the mountain paths, he did not stop enjoy the scenery a single time. Instead, he turned from one trail to another without hesitation, not even pausing at the crossroads, as if he had a particular destination in mind.

Eventually, they’d crossed half the mountain.

“Why do you keep walking this way?” Tianxiu asked. “Is there some place you’re trying to reach?”

“Well, not exactly,” Rex Spiritus replied. “It all depends on what I feel in the moment. I just have a sense that if we keep walking this way, we might encounter something special.”

Other people might be in the dark, but Tianxiu knew that Rex Spiritus liked to drift and enjoyed wandering the mortal realm. With his deep, innate spiritual intuition, he was often guided by the sly hands of fate. When he went where he wished, he often discovered something extraordinary along the way.

Sure enough, soon after he made his prediction, they came upon a strange temple deep in the mountains. What made the temple stand out was its location in an area with the thickest infernal energy in the entire region. Ordinary people could not discern this, but it was obvious to Rex Spiritus and Tianxiu.

Tianxiu, who dealt with fiends most, flicked at a bit of mud from the side of the temple with the tip of his sword. “Some calamity must have struck this temple years ago.”

“Ah!” Rex Spiritus exclaimed softly. “I thought so too. If everyone inside a temple died in some disaster, and if that temple happened to be in a natural depression in the mountains like this one, it would accumulate a strong infernal aura in time.”

That was all well and good if such a place remained vacant, but if the living were there, the conspicuousness of their vital energy in contrast to the infernal aura would attract fiends in droves. Regardless, when Rex Spiritus and Tianxiu looked through the gates of the temple, they discovered that not only was there a living person inside the shrine, there were several.

The temple’s courtyard was covered in moss, lending it the gloomy eeriness of damp spaces. Several bamboo stools with uneven legs were placed in the only dry spot, and several old men with white hair and beards sat there. A small child, thin as a monkey, was using a long bamboo pole to

try and knock some green fruit off a tree, though the fruit looked so sour that it could eat through teeth. Children have sharp eyes, and as soon as the child noticed someone outside the gates, he gripped the pole tighter and called out.

"Who are you?"

Rex Spiritus was blessed with good looks that made him easy to trust. He smiled at the child. "We're just passing through the mountains, but the paths are long, and it's getting dark. We were hoping to find a place to stay the night."

They had actually planned to leave as soon as they cleared out the infernal aura, but after finding this courtyard full of the old and frail, they wanted to watch over it for the night.

The child considered Rex Spiritus's silver-embroidered white robes and stammered, "B-but this place… It can't compare to an inn in the city. It's shabby—"

Rex Spiritus interrupted gently. "It will do fine as long as we have a roof over our heads."

The kid gave this a moment's thought, then stretched out his syllables to call into the building. "Abbot! *Hey*, Abbot! Someone wants to stay the night!"

Rex Spiritus and Tianxiu exchanged a look. *A dump like this has an abbot?*

The kid's voice was still echoing when they heard a few soft taps on the floor. A young man with a shaved head and a monk's habit shuffled out of the temple holding a wooden stick. Based on his face alone, the abbot appeared to be just the type fiends liked to feed on—he had white teeth, pink

lips, and a fair, smooth complexion, though he seemed to lack decorum. Perhaps from aversion to the rainy season's humidity, he'd shrugged off the top half of his tattered monk's robe. It piled loosely around his waist, so his upper body was bare, while his lower body was clad in just a pair of monk's trousers. He leaned against the door as if he couldn't stand properly either.

Rex Spiritus peered closer and saw that heavy cataracts clouded the young abbot's eyes; he was blind. A small white banner was tied to the wooden stick he used as a cane, and two crooked words were written there: *Serendipitous Divination*.

Rex Spiritus couldn't think of anything to say. He was thoroughly puzzled by this group, which was clearly not made of legitimate monks or religious practitioners. He suspected they were vagrants with no homes to return to who regarded the unclaimed temple as a place where they might take shelter and eke out a paltry living through occasional fortune-telling.

"How much silver do we owe you to stay here for the night?" Rex Spiritus asked after considering his words.

The abbot may not have looked like a proper abbot, but he did have the air of someone in charge. "Do you plan to share our food?"

"No."

"Do you intend to take our clothes?"

"Not that either."

"In that case, why would you owe us anything? There's one thing these mountains do not lack, and that's temples. There are plenty of ruins and dilapidated buildings to go around. We still have three, maybe four, empty houses left. Take whichever one you like."

Rex Spiritus and Tianxiu had traveled far and wide through the mortal realm and encountered many generous people, but it was rare to find generosity among people so poor they were forced to live in a ruined mountain temple with barely enough to feed and clothe themselves. It was quite the surprise.

In the mountains, night came swiftly. It almost seemed like the last bit of daylight faded the instant they stepped into the temple. The day's residual heat dispersed in an instant, and the evening's first mountain breeze chilled the room immediately. The old men and the child seemed habituated to the climate. They crept into the main hall with practiced ease, pulled out a large ceramic bowl, started a fire, and gathered around it for warmth. The abbot was the only one who seemed not to mind the cold. He pulled up the shirt pooled around his waist, wrapped himself in it, and sat away from the fire.

Rex Spiritus got an idea. With Tianxiu in tow, he approached the abbot. "How much to get my fortune told?"

"Pay what you want. You can give me as many coppers as you believe your fortune's worth."

Rex Spiritus searched through his goldfish-embroidered pouch only to discover it contained no copper. He then turned to rummage through Tianxiu's purse, but he didn't have any either.

"I don't have any copper, but if you read both our fortunes, I can pay you in silver. How's that?" Rex Spiritus asked.

For a moment, the abbot seemed to be thinking, *What?*

Seconds later, he had groped his way behind the fortune-telling table. He gestured at the seat placed in front of it, signaling Rex Spiritus and Tianxiu to sit down. The old people and the child who had been warming

themselves around the fire in another room just moments ago clustered around to watch.

The abbot addressed them. “It’s the same old rules. No talking when I’m divining. Otherwise, this blind abbot’s fortunes won’t be accurate.” He nodded in Rex Spiritus and Tianxiu’s direction. “And I must ask you two also not to speak while I’m divining.”

Is that really a thing? Rex Spiritus wondered.

“Fortune tellers are everywhere these days,” the abbot added. “Most of them are con artists who don’t know the first thing about this stuff. They’re just cold readers who try to get information out of you through talk. I don’t want to be lumped in with such people.” As he spoke, he reached under the table and brought out a palm-sized ceramic bowl. He filled it with a layer of dried grass and small branches, then handed an ember lighter to Rex Spiritus. “I divine with fire. Please, light the starter in this bowl.”

Rex Spiritus and Tianxiu could ignite a pillar of fire with just a snap of their fingers, but they accepted the lighter anyway. In their best imitation of mortals, they opened the tube and touched a spark of still-burning embers to the starter in the bowl. Two beads of flame appeared on the dried grass. Bit by bit, they drew closer until they engulfed the small wooden branches. The firelight grew bright and dazzling but did not burn too high. The blind man rubbed his fingers and palms, then placed his hands over the fire bowl as though he was touching the fire at a distance.

“Let’s talk about you first, young sir…” He held his hands over the flames a while longer, removed them, and rubbed them together hard before placing them over the flames again. “How odd. Most people want to know

about their career prospects, their love lives, or future good fortune or calamity. But you don't seem like you want to ask about any of these."

Rex Spiritus raised an eyebrow. *That's pretty accurate*. Indeed, there was nothing he really wanted to ask—they hardly needed some mortal to tell their fortunes.

"In that case, I'll just tell you whatever I see," said the blind man. This was usually the point when a fortune teller would talk about the past and present before moving on to whatever calamities might befall the seeker in the future and what they should watch out for. But after feeling the heat for some time, the blind man seemed stuck just trying to decipher Rex Spiritus's past. His face contorted into a frown until he finally gasped out: "I saw you walking out of a fog!"

The child holding up the bamboo basket to collect their money stared at the abbot. As soon as he heard this opening line, he knew the reading was doomed—yet again, the abbot couldn't see anything. Whenever he could not get a reading, the abbot started making up stuff about fog, clouds, mysteries, and other such ineffable things that couldn't be pinned down.

"You once lived in a place that was quite lively. There were always people around, day and night."

Hearing this, the child felt much more at ease. The young visitor was dressed in snow-white silk embroidered with silver, so he clearly didn't come from an ordinary family. He must have lived in a wealthy home surrounded by many servants. This prediction was probably a hit.

The blind man frowned, then continued, "I also saw a period of… loneliness. Extreme solitude in complete darkness—and it wasn't just for a

little while. It lasted a long time and was quite hard to bear—three years? Perhaps five?"

The child pondered these words. Young men from wealthy families frequently had such problems. Caught in melancholic fits of lamentation amid the falling leaves of autumn, they'd fancy themselves some tragic, forgotten flower left behind by the world. This was probably a hit as well.

The blind man moved his hands to another angle over the flames. "How strange… How very, very strange. I can't see your relationship with your family. This may sound a bit offensive, but I believe that your familial ties are either shallow or nonexistent."

The child felt this was a little risky to say. He stole a few glances at Rex Spiritus to gauge, only to realize he couldn't read the man at all. Then, the child started to analyze the words deeper. If this young man really was from a wealthy family, he would've brought his many attendants along with him before traveling into the mountains at nightfall, or he would've simply taken a carriage. But there were only two of them, so it followed that he was not close with his family—or perhaps not valued. This was probably a hit too.

The blind man spoke a while longer, and as he did, the child surreptitiously tallied each likely hit on his fingers. By his count, the client should have been more than halfway sold. Under these conditions, if the abbot began to offer predictions for his future or hint at some impending calamity, the client would happily spend more money in the hopes of averting disaster. Just as he thought this, the blind man spoke again.

"Now, let me see what's in your future."

All right! The child was ready with his bamboo basket, but after the blind man said this, he went silent. They waited a long, long while—so long

that the child was tempted to check the blind man's breathing. Finally, he began to murmur: "Your future is a haze as well. I can't see anything."

The child stared at him in stunned silence. He was so surprised he almost popped a blood vessel. What he couldn't know was that it was precisely this kind of remark that convinced Rex Spiritus the abbot was the real deal. Even the Heavenly Principles of the Spirit Terrace could not predict Rex Spiritus's future, let alone some mortal fortune teller.

Though the blind man felt defeated, he had two guests in front of him. If he couldn't figure out the young nobleman's fate, he'd just have to try the other one. He rubbed his palms together again and placed them back over the flames. Oddly, the fog he'd encountered earlier was even thicker now. Unwilling to let it go, he tried changing the angle of his hands over the flame. Since the first man he'd tried to read was so young yet uninterested in asking about his fortune in marriage, perhaps he'd already found his match. As soon as he connected this dot with whatever vague image he was able to read, he made up his mind and gestured at the person seated beside Rex Spiritus.

"If I'm not mistaken," he said, "this person is probably your wife. I'm sure she's both gentle and virtuous, pure as ice and refined as jade."

Tianxiu, his sword in his arms and no discernible expression on his face, was standing where the abbot gestured. Tianxiu stared back. Rex Spiritus, meanwhile, immediately rocked with silent laughter. The child stumbled and nearly put the bamboo basket over the blind man's head.

The blind man was the only one who had no inkling of the mistake he'd made, and he continued to read Tianxiu's fortune from the flames. "It's quite strange, but I didn't see a wedding hall around you and your missus…

No bride scale, palanquin, or bride's veil—no wedding stuff at all. Could it be that I've misread?"

"Could it be"? the child thought, exasperated.

The blind man mumbled as he felt the flames some more, and after eliminating the unlikely and strange explanations, he finally hesitantly offered, "You haven't been in a wedding hall, and you're trapped in the mountains at night. Are you and your missus…are you eloping?"

As the word "eloping" slipped from the abbot's mouth, the child couldn't take it anymore. He leaped up and covered the blind man's mouth, saying, "That's enough, Abbot, that's enough! If you keep talking, you'll not only not get a single copper cent, you may end up losing money!"

Now that the divination had reached an abrupt end, Lord Rex Spiritus, who was only in this for fun to begin with, started laughing. "Well, you're not wrong! I have indeed never walked into a wedding hall."

"Right?" the blind man said proudly.

The child stole a glance at Tianxiu's sword and cried out in despair, "Please stop talking!"

As this chaos erupted in the room, Tianxiu suddenly shot a look outside the door. His sword gave a soft metallic clink. Rex Spiritus narrowed his eyes as well, and his silver-filigreed blade turned once in his grasp. He put a finger up to his lips, signaling the elderly people and child in the room not to speak. The entire temple fell quiet. When the voices ceased, a new noise became audible—a rustling that sounded like millions of insects rapidly crawling their way. Dread gripped the group, and they looked at each other in terror.

“What is that?” whispered the blind abbot, whose hearing was even sharper than the others’.

“Fiends,” Rex Spiritus murmured.

“What?!” Everyone was aghast.

Rex Spiritus was going to warn them that this temple was in a dangerous location especially attractive to fiends, but then he considered that this place, as shabby and gloomy as it was, was the only home these people had. He held his tongue. It was merely a temple in a troublesome location, tainted by a years-long accumulation of negative energies. Once it was cleansed, none of that would matter.

The next instant, as a horde of screeching fiends surged into the room, two spiritual swords boldly left their scabbards. One shone through all with a luminous cold light, its sword aura swirling with a million golden rays, both audacious and stern. The other was as brilliant as the light of dawn illuminating the wilderness. The mountains around them lit up like the sun was shining. Under the light of day, the fiends had nowhere to hide. The child and the old men in the shrine would never forget this moment.

The only one who could not witness it was the open-minded and generous but blind abbot. He had to rely on the shrill screech of overlapping cries and the whistle of wind being sliced through to know that the fiends had arrived. The young man and his missus appeared to be capable cultivators, and each wielded a sword to force the fiends to retreat.

In the aftermath, the temple and all the surrounding wildlands seemed to have been renewed, as though no infernal auras would gather there for decades hence. The group could settle down in this place they called home and even survive there into old age.

Rex Spiritus planned to bid them farewell and leave the shrine near dawn after clearing out the last of the fiends and filth. When he and Tianxiu returned to the courtyard, the child was just helping the old men up from the floor where they'd fallen.

As they turned to leave, the abbot stumbled out and called after them. "Please wait! Please wait a moment!"

"What is it?" asked Rex Spiritus.

"There's no greater taboo to those of us who live off the art of divination than failing to repay a debt of gratitude. I fear that after today I won't get another chance to repay you, my benefactors, so I must do something. I have little to offer you right now, except for this one thing. Please don't look down on such a simple gift." As he spoke, he unrolled a sheet of red paper embossed with gold foil. The paper was marked with a set of runes he'd hastily scrawled there.

Rex Spiritus looked at it but couldn't understand a single word. "What is it?"

"The Scroll of Heaven and Earth," answered the blind abbot.

"The Scroll of Heaven and Earth?" Rex Spiritus exchanged a look with Tianxiu, who also seemed unfamiliar with the term. "Please forgive my ignorance and explain."

"You're not ignorant. This is just a local custom you won't find anywhere else, so it's reasonable that you wouldn't know about it." The blind abbot held the red paper out and said to Rex Spiritus, "Put your finger here, sir."

As Rex Spiritus, there was nothing for him to fear, so he certainly didn't worry about mortal trickery. Moreover, the abbot didn't seem like a dishonest person. He thus placed his finger on one end of the paper until a fingerprint slowly appeared there. The abbot shook the paper dry to make the fingerprint more prominent.

"You see, in many places, marriage depends on the word 'bow,'" the abbot explained. "You must bow to heaven and earth and bow to your parents. But we're not like that in these parts. Here, the most important aspect of marriage rites is a 'Scroll of Heaven and Earth.' When two people each leave a fingerprint on the scroll, the ceremony is complete. The couple will receive the blessing and protection of heaven and earth and all the splendid creatures of the world. I don't have much to offer to show my gratitude, just what little I know. Aren't you and your missus only missing the ceremony? This will help make up for that! Now that you've already laid down your print, let's have your missus do the same."

Rex Spiritus could think of nothing to say, and Tianxiu kept his own counsel.

Just as the blind man shook the red sheet of paper, ready to call out again for the "missus" in the direction of Lord Tianxiu, the child lunged to his feet. Assisted by the old men, he dragged the abbot, who still hadn't figured out that Tianxiu was not "the missus," back into the temple before he could embarrass himself any further. By the time they turned back around, the two men with the radiance of celestial beings had slipped off into the mountain fog.

They both smiled and shook their heads, then vanished without a trace.

Like a million other similar days and nights, that night, as long as it was, faded into the boundless, mist-veiled sea of time. Through the nigh-endless years that followed, no one brought it to mind.

A hundred years passed, followed by another hundred. By then, there was no longer a Rex Spiritus in Urbs Caelestia. He had become Wu Xingxue, the archon of Nightgleam, and the Tianxiu Immortal, Xiao Fuxuan, had just returned from the Extranorthern Reaches. Like everyone else, he remembered nothing of Rex Spiritus.

Xiao Fuxuan passed again through the southwest, only to find it dramatically transformed. The three hundred temples scattered throughout the mountains were now connected to villages and towns, and it was no longer possible to tell which was which.

Having received a heavenly edict, Xiao Fuxuan tracked a group of fiends into a nearby area. Though he should have gone south, he passed by an ancient temple and felt a strange compulsion to stop. Suddenly, he heard someone inside let out a startled cry of distress.

Xiao Fuxuan knocked on the door with his sword hilt and entered the shrine. Moss covered the courtyard, and a young initiate monk stood next to the well, splashing cold water onto himself. When the initiate saw Xiao Fuxuan, he stopped in place, then wiped his face dry.

“Sir, you’re—”

“I heard someone cry out when I was passing by,” Xiao Fuxuan interrupted. “I thought there might be fiends stirring up mischief.”

The initiate’s face went red. “I’m so sorry for scaring you, sir. That sound was, um, me. It wasn’t fiends stirring up mischief. I was just surprised

by this temple's former abbot." He decided it was inappropriate to say that the former abbot had caused plenty of mischief himself.

He scratched his head as he came up with a better way to put it. "See, the old abbot had some regrets before he passed, and he often visits my dreams to frighten me. Ever since I took up residence in this temple, he's been doing it… It's been more than ten years now. Wait! You asked me if fiends were here, so you must be a cultivator. Do you know any methods for dealing with nightmares?"

It was common knowledge that gods did not dream; naturally, they had no nightmares either. Xiao Fuxuan neither knew nor needed any strategies for dealing with them. Somehow, he found himself asking anyway, "What kind of nightmares?"

Finally finding a listener for his woes, the initiate dived into how the old abbot entered his dreams. "It's different every time. Sometimes he tells me he still owes a debt of gratitude, which is the biggest taboo among diviners. Sometimes he asks me to go search the altar, as if there's something hidden inside of it. Other times, he just makes me dream about wedding halls and stuff like that… I almost thought he was trying to trick me into an arranged ghost marriage."

When he finished, the initiate looked aggrieved.

"Have you tried looking through the altar? Did you ever find anything?" Xiao Fuxuan asked.

"There *was* something in there," the initiate said with a nod. "It was a piece of red paper with gold foil. It's humid around here, so it was pretty wet, and the words on it are a mess. No matter how hard I try, I can't decipher what it was for."

“Where is it?”

The initiate ran into the hall and soon returned holding the sheet of paper from ages past. Surprisingly, the cinnabar red had not faded at all. The words written on its surface, however, had disintegrated into smudges. No one could say what had once been written there nor guess its purpose. When Xiao Fuxuan saw the sheet of paper, his mind went blank for a split second. By the time he’d collected himself, his thumb had brushed the bottom half of the sheet.

The initiate stared at it blankly—until he gasped. Right where Xiao Fuxuan’s thumb had been, a fingerprint now darkened the paper. All at once, the initiate realized what the gold-foiled red sheet was.

“This is…a Scroll of Heaven and Earth!”

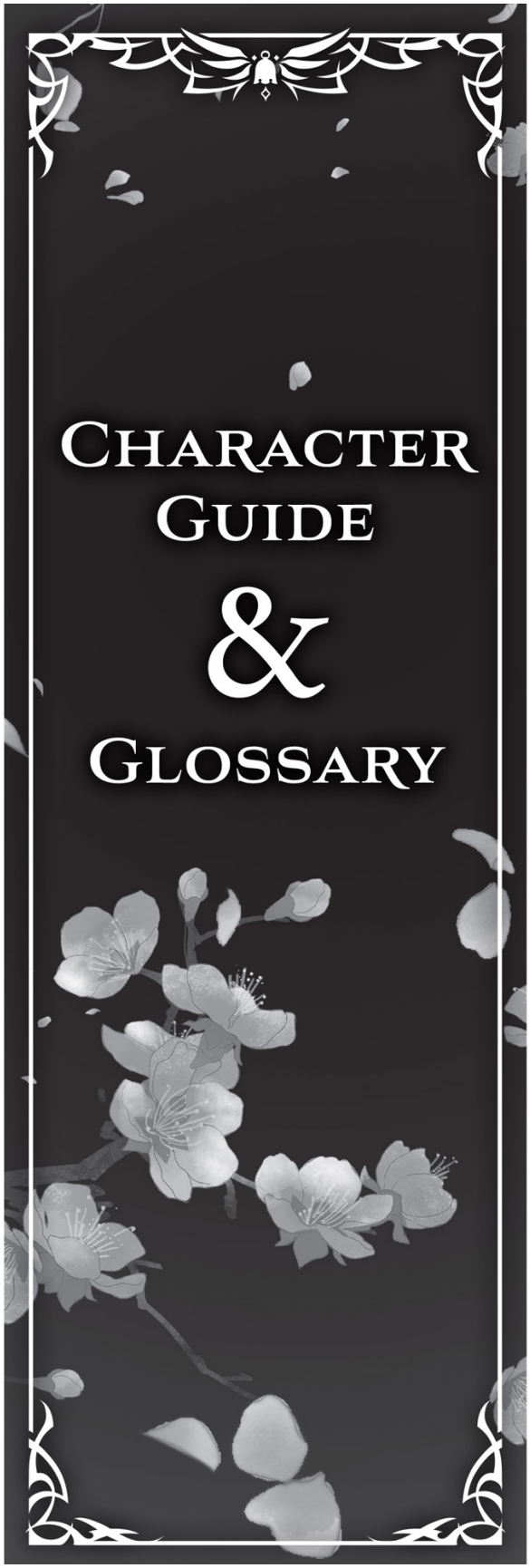
As Xiao Fuxuan left the ancient temple, the initiate showered him with words of thanks. He carried with him the gold-foiled red sheet that had given the initiate nightmares every night.

He stepped over the threshold and out of the temple. Somewhere in the city, someone was having a wedding. He heard the rhythmic beating of gongs cut through the morning fog, and torn bits of red and gold paper were sprinkled across the road. A horse-drawn carriage disappeared with a clip-clop down an alley. It stopped at a courtyard where a squire was just finishing reading out the Scroll of Heaven and Earth.

His voice rang out in singsong: “Press your finger here to leave your mark, and this ceremony is concluded.”

With heaven and earth as our witness, from now on, and across all lifetimes, we shall never forsake one another.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Three Hundred Years of Longing
VOLUME 3


Character
Guide
&
Glossary

SETTING

Three Hundred Years of Longing does not take place in any recognizable historical period or location; even its cultivation world is largely unlike those in its genre. The goal of cultivation is to ascend the white pagoda atop Mount Taiyin and reach apotheosis in Urbs Caelestia—which no longer exists, making celestial cultivation a dead end. The Imperial Capital fell many years ago, and the world is now overrun with fiends.

All the immortals are gone. This is a dying world.

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

WU XINGXUE 乌行雪 ("A RAVEN WHO WALKS ON SNOW"): The archon of the fiend haven Nightgleam, and the most powerful of all archfiends. Formerly Rex Spiritus of Urbs Caelestia.

XIAO FUXUAN 萧复暄 ("THE RETURN OF WARMTH TO DESOLATION"): The Tianxiu Immortal. Tianxiu (天宿) is the mansion that houses all the constellations. His title reads as: *All the stars in the sky.* His courtesy name, Mian—*absolution*—is also the name of his sword.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

FANG CHU 方储: An underling of Wu Xingxue. Initially known by his missing arm.

FENG HUIMING 封徽銘: Elder of the Feng Clan, adopted son of the clan patriarch.

FENG SHULAN 封殊蘭: Chief of disciples in the Feng Clan, adopted daughter of the clan patriarch.

GENERAL BAI 白將: A young general who died beneath the Arbor Divinus.

MENG GU 夢姑: One of two ministers of Urbs Caelestia's Pavilion of Rites. Has a fiery disposition.

NING HUAISHAN 宁怀衫: An underling of Wu Xingxue. Appears around fourteen years of age due to poisoning.

SANG FENG 桑奉: One of two ministers of Urbs Caelestia's Pavilion of Rites. A bit of a mother hen.

XUELI 薛禮: The current Archon of Nightgleam. A necromancer. Third son of the previous Feng matriarch, but has since turned his back on his family and discarded his surname.

YI WUSHENG 医梧生: An alchemist of the Hua Clan who specializes in somniamancy. His previous possession by the fiend Yunhai has left him with only a few days to live.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though

some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names from *Three Hundred Years of Longing.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin —and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

Wū Xíngxuě

Wū as in s**woo**p

Xíng as in **shing**, xu as **shoo**, ě as in **err**or

Xiāo Fùxuān

Fù as in **foo**d (but keep it short), x as in **sh**ut, uān as in **when**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

GLOSSARY

ARCANE FORMATIONS: Spells cast by placing items in specific configurations, usually finalized with a keystone or talisman.

COURTESY NAME: In this story, a name given upon invocation that demonstrates respect.

CULTIVATION/CULTIVATORS: In this story, there are around a hundred cultivation clans in the world, and two ways of achieving apotheosis: by the sword or by alchemy. Both involve strengthening one's celestial core. When a cultivator coalesces their vital energies into a celestial core, they can ascend to the white pagoda atop Mount Taiyin and through the gates of Urbs Caelestia. There, they undergo a ceremony at the Spirit Terrace, receive a set of heavenly edicts, and become immortal celestials. They are then commissioned either to act as a numen of a place or to oversee an idea. To mortals, celestials are gods. Since the destruction of Urbs Caelestia, cultivators can no longer become celestials, so many follow the infernal path and become fiends instead.

FIEND: Infernally aligned creatures, often once human but not always, and distinct from ghosts and ghouls. Examples include huskreavers, which devour beings from the inside out, and necromancers, who use sorcery to control the dead. Fiends cultivate an infernal core by absorbing living vital energy.

GHOUL: Creatures originating from the dead. They feed on vital energies, flesh, and bones of the living.

HEAVENLY EDICTS: Orders given to celestials by the Heavenly Principles.

HEAVENLY PRINCIPLES: The natural law that governs all. Heavenly mandates or punishments are backed by the Heavenly Principles.

HEAVENLY TRIBULATIONS: Trials given to cultivators so they can gain strength. In this story, they act as punishments and only arise due to karmic retribution.

JOSS STICKS: Incense burned as offerings to gods (celestials). Without offerings, celestials are demoted and can lose their celestial core.

MERIDIANS: Body channels and points mapped like constellations on the body that channel vital energy.

NECROMANCY: The manipulation of dead bodies for infernal cultivation.

NUMEN: A celestial with spiritual influence over a place.

PHANTOM SWORDS: Sword cultivators create tangible phantom copies of their weapons, which can be sent flying.

PUPPETS: Lifelike bodies made of paper talismans, folded like origami and animated by thaumaturgy. Can be controlled but are limited in action.

REVENANT: Ghosts lingering in the mortal world due to a desire for vengeance.

SOMNIAMANCY: The study of souls and their travel through dreams. Yi Wusheng is the only known expert.

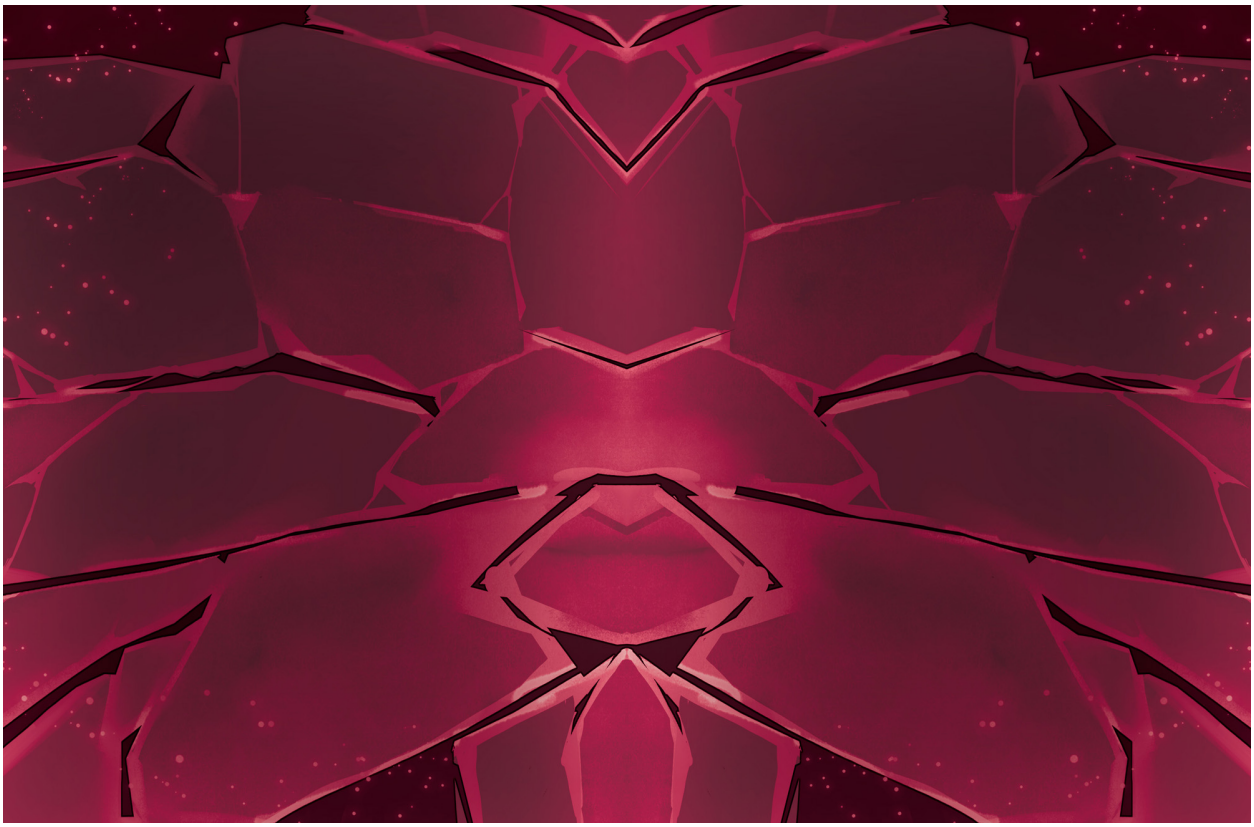
SORCERY: The power wielded by fiends.

THAUMATURGY: The power wielded by celestials.

TRIBULATION PERIOD: The term used by fiends to describe the recurring effects of being haunted by the vengeful spirits of those they have killed. This condition manifests as a persistent, extreme sensation of cold. Despite the name, it is unrelated to Heavenly Tribulations, though fiends like to think it is.

VITAL ENERGY: A force that exists in everyone. Can be focused and used as a force or as a softer but tangible aura that feels like a change in air pressure. Some techniques deplete it and require recovery time, such as Xiao Fuxuan's Fate's Victoria, and must be used sparingly.

WARDS/RESTRICTIONS: Persistent spells restricting movement between locations, usually placed on doors or borders.



How Many Lifetimes Will It Take?

Wu Xingxue has awakened and realized that he is indeed an archfiend. However, much of his past, like his connection to the mysterious Rex Spiritus or the Arbor Divinus, remains an enigma. Adding to the puzzle is the legendary Tianxiu Immortal, Xiao Fuxuan, who continues to support him. Wu Xingxue's fragmented memories suggest that Xiao Fuxuan's helpfulness might stem from a surprisingly simple reason—one that ties them together inexorably.

Determined to uncover the truth, Wu Xingxue travels with his ragtag group to the feared stronghold of fiends: Nightgleam. Once inside, he will surely encounter the archfiend who usurped his position as leader of all fiends.

But when they least expect it, the group is dragged into a vision of the past. And the illusion—if it *is* an illusion—holds more shocking revelations than any of them could have imagined.

A HAUNTING TALE OF EVERLASTING LOVE
FROM THE AUTHOR OF *COPPER COINS.*

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